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Walk Don’t Run

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a public aquatic center on a bridge that spans the Los Angeles River. Conventionally, riverfront promenades and bike paths run parallel to the water. Instead, I propose to locate the pools on a bridge over the river to connect existing and planned public parks on either side. Rather than providing a literal access to the river, I have used the bridge to offer new vantage points on it and incorporate the river into the city. At the same time, the program – a pool and laundromat – offers a direct experience of water. This thesis suggests that public bathing and swimming can provoke a new understanding of the city’s water as a shared resource, and along with that, a new form of collective social space for the city.
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Walk Don’t Run
In his 1971 book, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Reyner Banham called the city an instant paradise – just add water. Banham recognized that the extensive water infrastructure in Southern California was precondition of the city's very existence, and thought that technical ingenuity would make the fake paradise viable. And no Garden of Eden is more artificial than a swimming pool, which has become a kind of unofficial symbol of Los Angeles. Pools manufacture luxury out of concrete, water and sunshine – in this way they are analogous to the city itself.

Recently, though, water scarcity seems to threaten the lifestyle of which the swimming pool is emblematic. In 2015, severe drought prompted the State of California to impose restrictions on domestic water use. For the first time in the state’s history, private individuals were asked to reduce their personal consumption. However, there is hope that as the sprawling and polycentric city of Los Angeles becomes denser, taller, and less dependent on cars, it can also remake its water infrastructure for future generations. In response to the drought, the city government has optimistically promoted the transition to soft path water infrastructure, which prioritizes stormwater capture and the replenishment of underground aquifers.

The 51-mile storm drain known as the Los Angeles River is the most important component of the city’s flood control infrastructure. The concretized channel has been managed by the Army Corps of Engineers since the forties. Left to its own devices, the river was volatile. Very little water flowed through it most of the year, so when seasonal stormwaters came down from the mountains, the river was liable to dramatically change its course. Such
unpredictability was unacceptable to the city's property owners. After a few major floods in the first half of the twentieth century, the path of the river was fixed in concrete; it began to bear closer resemblance to a freeway than a river.

For decades now, the blank concrete riverbed has been a kind of screen onto which activists, planners, and artists have projected visions of a new city. Multiple constituencies are working to promote their competing agendas: reconstruct a river habitat for wildlife, convert the channel to more sustainable infrastructure, provide space for recreation, and, less benevolently, accelerate the gentrification of east side neighborhoods. Recently, funding at federal, state, and municipal levels has started to realize some of these riverfront projects – much of it on former-ly industrial parcels purchased by the city. But the promise of a terraced, nat-
The Los Angeles River is dry most of the year and prone to flash floods, so the public occupying the riverbed directly is a liability. The channel still has flood control work to do, which means that only certain sections of the river will be terraced and naturalized in this way.

My project is sited near these realized and planned proposals to create parks along the river, but at the same time it demonstrates the limitations of the riverfront as open public space. Freight and commuter rail lines still run on both sides of the river. Most of the existing buildings sit facing away from the river, not toward it.

Conventionally, riverfront promenades and bike paths run parallel to the water. Instead, I propose to locate the pools on a bridge that crosses the river, connecting the existing and planned public parks.

Instead of literal access at ground level, the bridge frames views of the river. At the same time, the program—a public aquatic center and laundromat—offers a direct experience of water. This thesis suggests that public bathing and swimming can provoke a new understanding of the city’s water as a shared resource, and along with that, a
new form of collective social space for the city.
The history of pools as collective urban spaces is a long one. The Imperial Roman baths were theatrical, intricate interiors, with the different pools – *frigidarium, tepidarium, caldarium* – arranged as a sequence of vaulted chambers along the axis of symmetry.

Modern pool builders would look to the Roman bath for a way to invest the pool with civic grandeur and monumentality. The formal symmetry of the bath was appropriated as a functional symmetry in the modern pool. In the Astoria Pool in Queens, separate dressing rooms and showers for men and women are arranged symmetrically on either side of the entrance. But instead of the intricate subdivision of an interior, here the three pools for diving, leisure, and wading appear as a figure in the landscape along the East River. In section, the pool choreographs the movement of swimmers down toward the water, the broad steps transforming the pool deck into a kind of theater.

Aurelio Galfetti’s Bellinzona Pool takes this idea of the pool as a figure in the landscape even further, consolidating the dressing rooms underneath a footbridge, with the pools arrayed on transverse axes. The clear separation in section between the pools on the ground and the dressing rooms above frames particular views between street, pools, and the landscape.

This set of precedents has set up the formal terms for any pool to follow – symmetry, tension between long axes.
and transverse axes, composition of figures in a landscape versus a subdivided interior, the reconciliation of small ancillary program with the vast horizontal expanse of the pools themselves. They choreograph the movement of human bodies around bodies of water. But these precedents demonstrate that the social choreography of a pool is not reducible to individual experience and perception. The intricacy and grandeur of the Roman Bath, the mass spectacle of the New Deal-era pool, freeing up of the ground in the modernist pool – all these construct particular social dynamics.

Within the architectural vocabulary suggested by these case studies, this thesis uses the architectural characteristics of pools to anticipate the urban environment that Los Angeles will become.

i. First, the bridge establishes a datum at the height required for the trains to pass below.

ii. The pools are arranged with respect to this line: the lap pool sitting on the ground to the west, the diving pool dug into the ground on the east side, and the shallow leisure and wading pools on the bridge itself, above the river.

iii. The structure of the bridge divides this bar into thirds.

iv. The supports at either end are perpendicular to the street, while the middle three piers align to the river.

v. The programmatic parts are arranged symmetrically: lap pool, public space, dressing rooms, recreation and wading pools, dressing rooms, diving pool.

vi. Instead of a singular procession down to the water, the circulation here doubles back on itself and moves up and down along the bridge.

vii. The pedestrian route runs along the southern edge, coming up from the sidewalk on the east side.
The path taken by the swimmers alternates between the fixed, defined paths of the ramps and more loosely defined zones. The west entry is a hairpin ramp, which brings people up into the middle of the building, with the lap pool on the left and entry to the dressing rooms on the right. At the top of the ramp, the view opens onto the Broadway Bridge and Elysian Park, meeting the path that the swimmers take on their way from the dressing room to the lap pool.
On the east end of the bridge, the pedestrian route is again brought in close proximity to the path from changing room to diving pool. Leaving the changing room, the swimmer has a view of the public entry ramp, and park and city beyond.
In place of gender-segregated locker rooms, the ancillary program is a large, open room. Individual dressing rooms, each containing a shower, are consolidated into blocks of eight dressing rooms. These blocks are arrayed to define a series of smaller spaces that open onto one another diagonally, defining more intimate zones while the structural grid overhead maintains the sense of an open public space. The swimmers filter through this area – which is open to anyone – and enter a really private space only when they close the door of the individual changing room and shower.
If the destination is the wading and leisure pools, the swimmer emerges on the top deck in the middle again, with pools to either side. The swimmer is facing the people coming up the opposite ramp. Arriving on the scene like this, the swimmer has gone from the close-range encounters of the dressing rooms to seeing others from a long distance away. Arriving on this long axis, the deep guardrails create the sense of a protected enclosure. Along the transverse axes, the views open up to the city.

The surface of the pool deck is just about level with the spring street bridge to the south. On the north side, there is the view of the river and Elysian park. On this transverse, north-south axis, the swimmer is suspended in the air at street level, immersed in the city.
The wading and leisure pools are cleaned with a biofiltration system, which can fit in the shallow tray that rests on the concrete trusses, without the need for a full-height mechanical room. And so the swimming pools and their planted regeneration ponds become a double of the dry, concrete riverbed below. The bridge offers new vantage points on the river, incorporating it into the city instead of treating it as an idyllic landscape.
Documentary and Duration
Walk Don’t Run is closer to documentary than fiction. I prefer to use the term documentary rather than designate the project as realist; realism is an imprecise and vaguely moral claim, while documentary suggests an active set of practices and aesthetic conventions. Walk Don’t Run is not realist in the colloquial sense of gritty or ascetic, nor engaged in a realism of truth or place-making, nor is it a mimetic realism that formally references contextual models. It uses design as a heuristic device, or as a way to pose questions, instead of treating the project as the outcome or synthesis of research. By locating a set of pools with various relationships to land – on the ground, in the ground, in the air – Walk Don’t Run attempts to play out the tension between a documentary framing of the river and the creation of an idealized new ground above it.

One way to understand the intentions of this project is through the documentary photographer Allan Sekula’s sustained relationship with the work of Frank Gehry. Sekula has photographed the Guggenheim Bilbao and chronicled the construction of the Walt Disney Concert Hall. In Sekula’s 1995 book, *Fish Story*, an image of an oil tanker docked in San Diego harbor is paired with an image of a conference room designed by Gehry in the shape of a fish. The metal hull of the ship and the metal hull of Gehry’s fish are presented one after the other, photographed from comparable perspectives. The ship is floating in maritime space like the fish is floating in gallery space. The room-sized fish plays with scale, and the photographs extend that play by scaling it up again to the size of a ship. Gehry’s work is shot through with nautical metaphors; Sekula’s pointed pairing of the two images drags Gehry’s conceptual appropriation of the fish body back into the sea.

In “Los Angeles: The Graveyard of Documentary,” Sekula lists the aspects of the city that make social realism “impossible” – among others, its ideology of self-improvement, its culture of leisure, its horizontality, and its climate. In other words, Los Angeles is too artificial, too relaxed, too spread out, and too sunny for someone like Walker Evans. The list is a provocation;
Sekula is a documentary photographer commenting on the impossibility of documentary. By pointing to the very features of the city that seem to defy representation, he is also pointing out a set of aesthetic conventions in documentary photography. Sekula’s documentary is not a passive depiction of a photographic truth, but is posited a way to challenge the subjectivism of contemporary art photography: “There used to be a myth that photographs told the truth. Now there is a myth that they don’t.”

To this end, he freely employs multiple conventions of documentary and links his images narratively and dialectically. Sekula’s realism is contingent – that is, it self-consciously relies upon its proximity to other images and relation to established visual and rhetorical conventions to be understood.

This approach allows Sekula to interpret Gehry not as an individual architectural visionary, but as an actor in the urban transformations of Los Angeles. On the topic of the formal virtuosity of the Disney Concert Hall, Sekula references a 1939 novel *Ask the Dust*, in which the protagonist survives only on free oranges: “A sickening surplus toxifies the very symbol of California’s invigorating bounty. I think Gehry’s aggressiveness as an architect is encoded in that manner…Los Angeles is a city of sunshine and bright reflective surfaces, so let’s give people more. Let’s give people more oranges.” Sekula is not an architecture critic, but his reading of Gehry in an encoded cultural field is nonetheless a very valuable one because it breaks the tautology of a purely formal interpretation of the work. The Disney Concert Hall is not just set of baroque geometric operations, or an indexical registration of its physical context, but a dialogue with its cultural context.

Sekula’s critique is polemical, and he is generally dismissive of the capacity of planners and architects to overcome powerful economic interests. His position toward architecture is that of an outsider and sometimes antagonist. Many aspects of Sekula’s work are so rooted in photography and the history of photography that it is difficult to imagine them being directly carried over to any other medium. Nevertheless, *Walk Don’t Run* attempts to deploy this narrative sensibility, which relies on doubling and seriality, in architectural design. It is skeptical of visionary proposals that present themselves as seamless and monotone fantasies. Instead, it recombines disparate cultural pieces – pool, bridge, river, laundromat – into a new architectural whole. The design is not used as a proof of concept, to make an imagined world appear viable. Instead, architecture is posed as documentary, a way to frame and represent the world in a new way.

To explain the attitude toward documentary that this thesis advances, it is useful to refer to a short piece on the work of Hans Haacke by Yves-Alain Bois, called the “The Antidote.” Bois interprets Haacke’s work as a kind of counter-reading of the circumstances of its making – in Haacke’s case, corporate sponsorship of the arts through the Cartier Foundation: “I’m referring to context-specificity, a quality of Haacke’s work which has struck most commentators. It is the nature of the antidote that it be specific. Myriads of children’s stories draw their suspense from a lost or closely kept secret for the fabrication of a precise counter-poison: nothing could be more pointed, less general than an antidote.”

Of course, context-specificity has its own meaning in architectural discourse that is quite separate from its use in art. A sensitivity to context in architecture is usually interpreted as deferential; a sensitivity to context in Haacke’s sculpture is pointed and aggressive. To put it another way, context-specificity in architecture is typically understood as an end in itself. Bois is suggesting something a bit different – context-specificity as a means to an end.

In his essay, Bois refers to a 1934 text by Bertolt Brecht, “On the Restoration of Truth,” in which Brecht undertakes a point-by-point counter-reading of fascist propaganda to expose its artifice. Each sentence is amended to produce an alternate narrative. Bois summarizes the procedure thus: “When one has to swim against a tide of tacky rhetorical treacle, there are not many ways to save oneself. Brecht’s proposed procedure is to create an antidote of even greater stickiness than the original glue, thus opposing a rigorously adhering word-for-word gloss to the viscous primary text.” As Bois points out, this process demands a sticky engagement with the offend-
Documentary and Duration

This process is more like chemistry than physics – instead of opposing its force with an equal and opposite counter-argument, a chemical reaction dissolves ideology at a molecular level.

Likewise, Walk Don’t Run adheres closely to the rhetoric employed by the river revitalization boosters. The doubling of the river as a bridge can only be understood as rhetorical, context-dependent gestures. In answer to calls for green “linkages” between neighborhoods, the bridge makes literal connection between neighborhoods across the river. By using biofiltration for the wading and leisure pools, the project modifies the desire to “restore river habitats” through a highly artificial use of planting. It qualifies the touristic gaze of the river colonists with a stereotypically Los Angeles program, the swimming pool. The gentrifying effects of a new public amenity, and the exclusive focus on the leisure value of water, are undercut by the inclusion of a laundromat on the west side of the bridge. These interventions recall Sekula’s doubling of Gehry’s fish-shaped conference room as an oil tanker – a literal extension of the logic of river development that turns it on its head.

Brecht suggested that his counter-reading could then be interpreted in reverse, to expose the propagandistic mechanisms of fascism: “Then one sees what sort of a man he is, which class he belongs to, which task this class has taken on itself to solve, and how it is solving it.” Bois, approaching Brecht through Roland Barthes, does not understand the method as Brecht himself did – as a means of exposing class struggle. I would suggest that the correctness or moral authority of this approach is somewhat beside the point. I am less interested in evaluating the critical capacity of this method quantitatively – whether it is more or less critical than another tactic – than in considering the qualitative form of critique and its usefulness in architecture. Because it accepts a rhetorical structure that is already in place, the Brechtian counter-reading demands a sustained engagement with a text over time. The method has inherent duration.
This recognition of time is the aspect of Brecht’s method that is most relevant to architecture. Many contemporary architects claim that they are dealing in fictional narrative. However, they approach fiction in a way that prevents meaning or experiences from unfolding temporally. They resort to monotone renditions of fairy tales and science fiction, and therefore tend to evoke a general mood of fantasy more than an actual narrative arc. They effectively remove a work of architecture from its historical context in order to produce a fictional consistency internal to the work. A documentary approach, or a counter-reading of context, offers much richer possibilities for an architecture to modulate experience in time.

Walk Don’t Run is deliberately presented in two modes of perspectival rendering: textured color images depicting groups of people, and lucid greyscale collages depicting one or two individuals. On one level these two forms of representation stand in for the positioning of the individual in the collective that is inherent to any public architecture. But the two types are also asynchronous – a reminder that perception is fragmented by time. Walk Don’t Run is less interested in the pool program itself as a form of public leisure than in breaking the program into stages where the individual swimmer’s relationships with the city and other people are constantly renegotiated.

In Walk Don’t Run, the sequence of movement embedded in the program – the swimmer’s path through the dressing room to the pool deck – amplifies the durational aspect of architecture. This procession introduces the possibility of a prolonged engagement with the contingencies of the street and the river. This layering of meaning over time plays out clearly on the deck of the central leisure and wading pools, where the railings create a sense of enclosure along the long axis of the pool deck, while the transverse axis opens up views of the city. This produces an oscillation over time between an internally-focused, protected public amenity and a public space with a strong relationship to the street.

The oscillation is related to what Colin Rowe calls the “elaborate divorce of physical reality and optical impression,” or the dislocation of the subject at Le Corbusier’s La Tourette. Rowe describes La Tourette as a kind of dialectic between the universal and the particular. The work is compositionally a whole, but the visitor’s perception is fragmented into frequently contradictory impressions. Rowe’s writing is constantly circling around conceptual and perceptual readings of architecture, and this dichotomy has been a commonplace of architectural discourse ever since. It is intimately related to an idea of architecture as a sort of language or syntax. A conceptual architectural language might be intellectually decipherable even if it is not decipherable as a spatial experience; there is an arbitrary relationship between subjective experience and architectural concept. They are irreconcilable modes of understanding, and the work of architecture is an unstable object between the two.

Rowe’s essay articulates a part-to-whole relationship in which the parts only ephemerally come together to produce a coherent whole. This opens the work up to empirical investigation, without leaving its formal and conceptual order behind. Walk Don’t Run attempts to exaggerate this difference in its overdetermined circulation paths, which stage encounters between the swimmer and the city, as well as between the swimmer and other swimmers. Synchronically, the plan view reveals a compositional logic of self-similar parts. Experienced in motion, Walk Don’t Run produces a set of encounters, the meaning of which is contingent on the immediate context. These incursions of the real is what makes the project documentary rather than fiction. The architecture becomes a device for interpreting public life in the city.
Artificial Waters

Notes


5. Bois, 130.

6. Brecht, 139.

In 1976, someone shot an arrow with a stick of dynamite attached to it into the William Mulholland Memorial Fountain on Los Feliz Boulevard and Riverside Drive. This was an apparent attempt at vandalism in an ongoing war over water rights between the city of Los Angeles and Owens Valley. The fountain was dedicated to Mulholland, the engineer responsible for the construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct in 1913. By directing water to the city from the Owens Valley over 200 miles away, this massive infrastructural project anticipated and fueled the city’s explosive growth in the 1920s. At the same time, it had devastated the Owens Valley landowners who hoped to use their land for ranching and agriculture. The attack was ineffective – when the arrow hit its target, the water in the fountain extinguished the dynamite.

In the origin myths of Los Angeles, the aqueduct stands for the city’s corruption. In a chapter titled “Rape of the Owens Valley” Morrow Mayo’s 1933 book Los Angeles valorized the Owens Valley ranchers – who had subjugated the Paiute who had originally irrigated the valley for cultivation – as authentic pioneer settlers whose idyllic farmlands were being destroyed by the thirsty metropolis. Roman Polanski’s Chinatown (1974) has ingrained a vague suspicion of the city’s water system deep into its cultural imaginary. Polanski’s fictionalized account plays on the accusation that Mulholland and other city officials fabricated a drought to frighten citizens into supporting their massive public works project. Mulholland did exaggerate the threat of a coming drought while campaigning for the 1905 and 1907 bond issues, but it is unlikely that anyone actually manipulated the city’s water supply as the film depicts. Historically, a group of real estate speculators, who had parceled out the land in the San Fernando Valley among themselves, held a great deal of influence in the city and profited enormously from the aqueduct’s development.

These accusations of conspiracy by the San Fernando Land Syndicate were first leveraged by the left in Los Angeles as the aqueduct was being funded and built. The mayoral election of 1911, which Job Harriman
Artificial Waters

nearly won as a candidate from the Socialist Democratic Party of America, saw the nearly-completed aqueduct as a wedge issue. Though the works were almost complete at the time of his candidacy, Harriman pledged that the syndicate wouldn’t see a drop of the aqueduct’s water. At the time, the aqueduct was seen as a move to consolidate power and control over resources in the hands of the city’s conservative elite, at the expense of the workers. Socialist newspapers propagated a false claim that the water from the aqueduct was unsafe to drink and vociferously opposed its construction. The conservative, anti-union Los Angeles Times, run by Harrison Gray Otis, unabashedly promoted the aqueduct project. Otis, who usually opposed any kind of municipal investment, was himself a member of the syndicate.

The development of water infrastructure in Los Angeles is inseparable from the development of real estate. Artificial bodies of water are conspicuously exploited in real estate speculation. The lake at MacArthur Park, for example, was transformed from a swampy water body into a scenic amenity in order to enhance the desirability of adjacent properties. Echo Park Lake—originally Reservoir No. 4 of the Los Angeles Canal and Reservoir Company—was handed over to the city in 1891. In the subsequent decade, the former reservoir, which had been used industrially to power mills downtown, was converted to recreational and flood control uses for the upscale streetcar suburb. Venice was established as the seaside resort attraction Venice of America by Abbot Kinney in 1905. Its canals, marketed as reproductions of the canals of Venice, Italy, were dug to drain the existing marshes. This history suggests that any response to the ongoing water crisis, such as a shift from the massive infrastructural works like the Los Angeles Aqueduct to soft-path water control systems, will be more than purely technical improvements to infrastructure.

Southern California’s water wars have outlived Mulholland by a century. In 1976, the year the arrow was shot into the fountain, Inyo County petitioned the courts to stop the city from pumping water out of the Owens Valley, arguing that the increased dust and decreased water table
posed a health hazard to residents. The court ruled that Los Angeles could not justify pumping more water from Inyo County because it had not implemented an effective water conservation program. It would not allow the city to continue until it lowered its water consumption rates, though these were already the lowest per capita in the region. On May 12, 1977 the Los Angeles City Council instituted mandatory water rationing in the city. This conservation effort was immediately taken by some Angelenos as a threat to their very way of life. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Remi Nadeau argued that any reduction in water use, even for apparently trivial amenities like lawns and swimming pools, would constitute a “cultural decline in the Toynbeean sense.”

Water scarcity has always been posed as an existential threat to the city; in Los Angeles, the most optimistic attempts at resource management are always shadowed by the specter of the city’s perceived ecological illegitimacy.

Power struggles over water between rural agricultural interests and urban areas are a recurring theme in the state’s politics. California’s complicated water system reflects its history. Cities established as Spanish colonies, including Los Angeles, operated under so-called pueblo rights, which maintained water as a resource held in common. Miners of the state’s mid-nineteenth century gold rush, who often built waterways to transport water far from its natural source, adopted an appropriative system, which gave water rights to the first to stake a claim. With its statehood, California adopted a principle of riparian water rights derived from English common law, meaning that the right to use the water is granted to the owner of the land adjacent to it. The state did not attempt to limit these riparian and appropriative systems until 1928, when it amended Article X of the state constitution to assert that water should be put to “reasonable and beneficial use...in the interest of the people and for the public welfare.” Agriculture, domestic use, conservation, and recreation have all been considered beneficial uses under the law. These laws, however, only applied to surface water; in most parts of the state, groundwater pumping remained entirely unregulated until the 2015 drought.

Today, as climate change is expected to cause more frequent periods of drought, the long-standing competition for water resources between
the state’s rural agricultural interests and metropolitan growth has come into the foreground once again. On April 1, 2015 Governor Jerry Brown declared a State of Emergency in response to worsening drought conditions. It was the first time that the state government had placed restrictions on domestic water use. However, rather than manipulating fears about water scarcity and an impending collapse of civilization, water conservation is being optimistically leveraged as a powerful argument for urban density. Throughout the crisis Mayor Eric Garcetti remained remarkably sanguine about the city’s future, characterizing the California water crisis as a “Mullholand moment” – a chance to remake the city’s infrastructure with profound and far-reaching effects on the urban environment.11 The move to refashion Los Angeles’s stormwater infrastructure to recapture and recycle that water could attach itself to a different kind of urbanism than Los Angeles has yet seen.

Notes
9. This association between the aqueduct and class struggle is echoed by more contemporary critics as well: “Within twenty years a Bismarckian municipal will – manifest in both public works and private monopoly – had created the world’s biggest manmade port, aqueduct, and inter-urban electric railroad system. The same iron will, as we have seen, also smashed the labor movement in Los Angeles with the aim of giving the Otis-organized Merchants and Manufacturers Association a competitive advantage over their regional rivals in union citadel San Francisco.” Mike Davis, City of Quartz. (London and New York: Verso, 1990): 113.
10. Kahrl, 422
Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) is now a well-established nonprofit organization, but its beginnings were surprisingly humble. Poet Lewis MacAdams founded the group with an eponymous piece of performance art at the Wallenboyd Theater, commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1985. MacAdams was intrigued by the forgotten river underneath the engineered flood control channel. After obtaining consent from the river spirits to advocate for it, MacAdams painted himself green, delivered a monologue as William Mulholland, and imitated the sounds made by native animal species. With the proceeds from this performance, MacAdams printed up some bumper stickers and started a movement.

Total concretization of the river might now appear heavy-handed, but the project was only initiated after half a century of failed flood control efforts. Before its channelization, the Los Angeles River was a threat. Before 1825, the river flowed west into Santa Monica Bay – the flooding that year was violent enough to shift the course of the river over ten miles south, into San Pedro Bay. Floods in 1919 and 1934 were also catastrophic. Private landowners often diverted flood waters onto a neighbor’s property to protect their own. When the Army Corps of Engineers channelized the river, they protected property owners across the city, and created a north-south infrastructural spine between downtown and the harbor. Trains ran alongside the river, while factories and warehouses cropped up along its edge.

In the eighties, the Los Angeles River was a punchline – one local politician proposed painting it blue so that people would know it was there. Though it wasn’t exactly an inviting space, the river was hardly a cultural wasteland. The river was traversed by historic bridges designed by Merrill Butler in the twenties and thirties. Countless muralists and graffiti artists had made use of its concrete surface. Cinematographers had made good use of the riverbed’s distinctive geometry – it was where John Connor fled the T-1000 in *Terminator 2*. But it took an idealist like MacAdams to see the river, not as an impressive piece of infrastructure, but as an ecological treasure. Over the past thirty years, many groups and individuals have been lobbying to transform the river into a public park.
Proponents of this vision of a green spine connecting the city will often refer to an unrealized 1930 plan for Los Angeles by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Harland Bartholomew. Their plan was to mitigate floods by creating a 17.6-mile green belt along the river. It would have cost seven times the city’s annual budget, and most of that money would have been spent in land acquisition because development had been permitted right up to the river’s edge. During the Great Depression, the labor-intensive 1935 Army Corps plan to channelize the river was ultimately the more attractive option. Still, for many, the Olmsted/Bartholomew plan signifies a missed opportunity for Los Angeles to become an authentic city where rapacious development interests could at least occasionally be curbed by civic values.

Today, as drought becomes a more persistent concern, the fact that the channel sends storm runoff directly into the ocean is seen as a missed opportunity. By augmenting the river channel with soft-bottomed catchment basins, more of that water could be allowed to filter back through the soil into the aquifer. The river’s advocates scored a significant victory in May 2016, when the city council approved a $1 billion restoration of an 11-mile stretch of the river known as the Glendale Narrows. This area of the river near Elysian Park does not have a concrete bottom, so plants and wildlife have already established themselves there. The Army Corps plans to terrace the sides of the river as well and transform it into a park.

But the restoration of the Los Angeles River isn’t just for steelhead trout; mid-rise condominium buildings flourish in this habitat as well. Today, the Los Angeles River is central to the project of eastside gentrification. There is a danger that organizations like the Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SAECA) and the Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA), who have campaigned for environment improvements in neighborhoods along the river for decades, will be shoved aside by newcomers with deep pockets. Groups of artists, planners, and academics like the nonprofit Project 51 project a vision of an urban playground in place of a social justice mission. As creative industries move eastward and inward, these “riverly” urban col-
Paint It Blue

Frank Gehry’s involvement in the project was initially controversial precisely because he expressed an appreciation for the stark, vast concrete of the riverbed. Some took Gehry’s involvement as a positive sign that the city was finally taking the river seriously; others saw an activist movement being co-opted by a celebrity. Those who only recognize Gehry as the virtuosic designer of beautiful objects fear that the Los Angeles River is in for the bent metal treatment. Phase 1 of the project, however, gives no indication that Gehry will produce a typical architectural work or master plan for the river. Gehry Partners, OLIN, and Geosyntec have created the Los Angeles River Index, a website to present data on the hydrological, ecological, social, and economic performance of the river. It is essentially a series of GIS maps with information and maps that correspond to a broad range of good intentions: Flood Risk Management, Water Recharge, Water Quality, Greenhouse Gas, Ecology and Habitat, Open Space and Parks, Public Health and Social Equity, Transportation, and Programming. Intended as a way to structure public discussion, the site presents the metrics and approaches that are being used to study each of these issues. The index is a statement of purpose, and there is little in it yet that might raise either objections or interest.

With a company called Trimble, the project’s authors are assembling a LiDAR scan of the entire length of the river and its adjacent properties. This data will be made public as part of a “toolset,” inviting proposals from any party who knows their way around a BIM file. The LiDAR scan promises a democratic, egalitarian access to knowledge. The whole river at 1:1 scale; its virtual double. And at the same time, it is there to invite speculation and intervention. The effervescent colored dots of the scan are indexical marks – their aesthetic appeal is incidental. The LiDAR scan aspires to completeness. It captures the individual weeds that have found a grasp in its sloping concrete banks and the slouching power lines overhead. This exhaustive attention to particularities seems to force any potential designer into a kind of radical nominalism – any project for the river is already
posed as one of restoration or preservation. Urban renewal had to envision a city cleared of all occupation, a tabula rasa on which the universal space of modernist architecture could be shaped. LiDAR almost makes this kind of abstraction impossible. What kind of ground is being prepared here?

The extent to which this democratization of information becomes relevant knowledge for the transformation of the Los Angeles River remains to be seen. The Phase 2 toolset also promises a kit of parts “to be used along the entire 51mile [sic] length of the river. The kit of parts will identify potential interventions with various options for each.” The typification proposed by the kit of parts appears to be a corrective to the nominalism of the LiDAR scan – or it may just be an empty gesture toward participatory design.

Notes

13. It took federal authority to finally tame the river, a fact that does not fit very well in Reyner Banham’s portrait of the city’s democratic cultural ecology.


15. For the prehistory of these eastside–westside dynamics, see Mike Davis, “Power Lines” in City of Quartz. (London and New York: Verso, 1990); 101-149.

16. Gehry’s impolitic – if personally satisfying – public statement that his critics “need to grow up” actually seems to have quieted their opposition.
Though the bath is an ancient architectural type, the public swimming pool is a modern phenomenon. In the United States, the invention of public pools is associated with Progressive Era reform movements in the industrial slums of cities like St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and Milwaukee. Appalled at the lack of hygiene among workers living in tenements without running water, reformers promoted public baths as a way to ensure physical and moral cleanliness. As germs became more widely understood to cause diseases like polio, cholera, and typhoid fever, separate showers were added and the pools themselves grew into spaces for recreation rather than washing.

In 1910, New York City alderman John Purroy Mitchel proposed building a public swimming pool in Central Park. The park’s elite users, however, vehemently opposed the plan. A *New York Times* editorial suggested that the pool should be constructed underneath the Queensboro Bridge instead. Banished from the pastoral idyll of Olmsted and Vaux, the public pool became identified with the landscapes of urban infrastructure. Efforts to make swimming pools appear natural are the exceptions that prove the rule; the typical public pool today bears a closer resemblance to a warehouse than to a pond.

In 1936, New York City, under the leadership of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, opened eleven heated, outdoor public swimming pools in one summer. Much of this work was funded by the federal government through the Works Progress Administration; organized leisure time was seen as a democratic and economically sound public investment. Public recreation facilities would be a wholesome antidote to the boredom of widespread unemployment. These simple, open-air pools, which Lewis Mumford praised as a “sound vernacular modern architecture” were elevated by the symmetry and civic grandeur of Beaux-Arts planning. The pool mechanical systems and construction details were standardized, while the architectural expression of each park was unique. Moses’s standardized set of pools constituted an infrastructure of mass leisure.
Pools became highly volatile sites in the efforts to desegregate public institutions. They provoked racist fears about hygiene and sexual propriety; they were also attractive enough as amenities that many courageous individuals would risk mob violence for the privilege of enjoying them. Many towns, including Warren, Ohio and Montgomery, West Virginia simply closed their pools or leased them to private operators rather than open them to African Americans. In 1949, an attempt to desegregate the pool at Fairgrounds Park in St. Louis set off two days of violence by white rioters. The integrated pool only reopened one year later after a federal court order, and then only with boys and girls allowed to swim on alternate days.\textsuperscript{21} In some cases, city officials supported integration but, because many white people avoided desegregated pools, they could no longer recoup their management expenses in entrance fees and shut them down entirely.

Suburbanization, desegregation, and new pool shell construction technology coincided to produce a boom in private swimming pool construction during the fifties and sixties. Investment in backyard pools and private swim clubs outstripped investment in public pools. After a period of relative neglect, urban public pools are enjoying increasing popularity. McCarren Park Pool in Brooklyn was closed for over two decades between 1984 and 2008, briefly serving as an outdoor concert venue during Williamsburg’s gentrifying heyday. The state of public pools is a measure of investment in social well-being. Pools are more than just neighborhood hangouts – they comprise a public infrastructure for leisure.

The connection between pools and infrastructure has ancient precedent. The water of the imperial Roman baths was supplied from the aqueduct and ran continuously.\textsuperscript{22} The baths were a primary consumer of the city’s water resources. According to Vitruvius, the city’s water supply was to be divided three ways: one pipe for public fountains, one for the public baths, and one for private uses: “This is to be managed that the water for public use may never be deficient...I have made this division in order that the rent which is collected from private individuals who are supplied with
water, may be applied by collectors to the maintenance of the aqueduct.”

Frontinus presents a far messier picture of ancient Roman water management, describing politics, construction error, and fraud. He also emphasizes the cultural importance of public bathing facilities, which were entitled to greater privileges than other water licenses. At the same time, he laments the wastefulness of the best water sources being used in the bath: “We have found even Marcia, so charming in its brilliancy and coldness, serving baths, fullers, and even purposes too vile mention.”

This link between water management and bathing can inform contemporary public pools. In Los Angeles today, where fears about water scarcity make pools seem like unaffordable luxuries, linking the pool to the water system can be a way to create a culture around water conservation. Despite the popular visibility of celebrity pool parties at luxurious Malibu mansions, Los Angeles has an excellent public pool system. Consistent with Los Angeles’s polycentric urban form, its pools are maintained by multiple and overlapping local authorities – the city of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, and 54 other individual municipalities within the county. These pools are also functionally dispersed – some cater more to families with children, others to adult lap swimmers, and some are operated in association with Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to serve school swim teams as well as the surrounding community. The Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation manages the majority of pools in underserved and unincorporated areas in within the county, while the City of Los Angeles Aquatics Division manages older facilities.

As much it is a democratic social proposition, a public swimming pool is also a technical instrument, a machine which must hygienically contain the fluid dynamics of water and of society. The mechanical systems, operational management, and the more conventionally architectural and symbolic features of the pool are all parts in this machine. The radical freedom promised by the vast horizontal expanse of the pool is only made possible by a highly choreographed and controlled system of entry, undressing, and showering. This entry sequence is a precise and explicit management device.

Because Los Angeles operates a range of facilities from different time periods, the locker room and entry sequence varies from pool to pool. While hygiene, cleaning, and lifeguarding procedures are uniformly maintained, there seems to be a measure of flexibility in how the social dynamics of pool access are managed. The most common set up, however, is for gender-segregated locker rooms separated by a central office. The swimmer places their street clothes in a green mesh bag and hands it over to an attendant in exchange for a numbered pin which can be worn while swimming. This clothing check area is always organized to prevent any visual connection between men’s and women’s locker rooms. The attendant is an instrument of surveillance whose presence reinforces the public nature of the locker room in a way that a system of temporary lockers would not. The use of cell phones and cameras – private viewing devices which would undermine the implicit optical hierarchy of the pool in which attendants and lifeguards occupy privileged vantage points – is typically prohibited.

The LA Swim Stadium, a former Olympic venue, first sorts the swimmers by gender, and then sorts them again by age – there are separate locker rooms for men, women, boys, and girls. These fine-grained identity distinctions and labyrinthine locker room arrangements make for a much more stilted and atomized swimming experience, more appropriate for an athlete or swim team. The family- and recreation-oriented Hansen Dam aquatic center has only individually accessible restrooms and changing rooms with open air showers, allowing parents to stay with children of another gender. This makes the entry sequence to Hansen Dam far more casual and relaxed, and contributes to a markedly more convivial atmosphere in the pool itself. Gender-segregated locker rooms are convenient for athletes
and sports teams, but cause problems for single parents and other caregivers. Individual, gender neutral changing rooms not only accommodate gender non-conforming individuals, but also more accurately reflect the social realities of many pool users – children, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

A public pool has to balance an often contradictory set of relationships. The apparent freedom of near-naked buoyancy is tempered by the surveillance of lifeguards and their insistence on the rules. The isolation of the locker room is countered by the exposure of being in public space. Spatially and architecturally, pools negotiate small-scale dressing rooms with very large bodies of water. They are materially ascetic, yet convey luxury and relaxation. These extremes produce a constant negotiation between the individual and the mass, where architecture produces the ground on which the ghost of a subject can momentarily emerge.

Notes


21. Wiltse, 179.


23. Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, Book 8, Chapter 6, Section 2.


25. Frontinus, 421.

26. See Appendix A.
Bibliography


**Bibliography**


Los Angeles County operates 29 public swimming pools. 14 of these are located within the city of Los Angeles, and eight are located in unincorporated areas of the county.

The City of Los Angeles operates 56 swimming pools. 15 of these are open year-round, and eight are indoor. Six are associated with the Los Angeles Unified School District, and 11 are equipped with lifts for people with disabilities. Seven are currently closed due to disrepair.

54 of the 88 cities within Los Angeles County operate their own municipal swimming pools. In total, there are 77 pools operated by cities other than the City of Los Angeles. Including county-run pools, there are 162 public swimming pools in Los Angeles.
### Survey of pools managed by the City of Los Angeles Parks and Recreation Department – Aquatics Division

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Survey of pools managed by the City of Los Angeles Parks and Recreation Department – Aquatics Division

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Appendix A: Public Pools in Los Angeles

### Appendix A: Timeline of City-Run Pools

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<td>Playground department constructs first wading pools</td>
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<td>1912</td>
<td>City opens its first municipal swimming pool, Bethlehem Baths</td>
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<td>1914</td>
<td>Playground department constructs first wading pools</td>
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<td>1914</td>
<td>Army Corps of Engineers begins concretization of the Los Angeles River</td>
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<td>1923</td>
<td>St. Francis Dam Disaster</td>
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<td>1928</td>
<td>State health board closes 10 miles of Los Angeles beaches after city sewage dumping causes disease outbreaks</td>
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<td>1941</td>
<td>Army Corps of Engineers begins concretization of the Los Angeles River</td>
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<td>1943</td>
<td>State health board closes 10 miles of Los Angeles beaches after city sewage dumping causes disease outbreaks</td>
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<td>1946</td>
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<td>1950</td>
<td>2000: $2.1 billion state parks referendum</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>1980: Los Angeles River floods in Long Beach</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>2000: $2.1 billion state parks referendum</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1980: Los Angeles River floods in Long Beach</td>
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Petersschule

Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer, 1926

Recreation is the most important programmatic element of this school. Generous platforms and exterior stairs wrap around the vertical classroom block. With so much horizontal surface lifted off the ground, the building creates a new, dynamic terrain. The peripheral circulation and use of repetition indicate that the building was designed to be experienced in motion, not through static composition.

Astoria Park Pool

John Matthews Hatton, 1936

Astoria Park Pool is one of the eleven pools built in New York by Robert Moses. It is situated along the East River in Queens, sloping down so that the pools are initially hidden behind the dressing rooms. From a central ticketing booth, men and women enter on either end of the pool area through separate dressing rooms. Its vast, beach-entry pool affords views of the Robert F. Kennedy and Hell Gate Bridges.
Centenary Swimming Pools
James Birrell, 1957-59

The Centenary Pool in Brisbane site below the level of the street. Ramps lead up to a restaurant (now a gym) that overlooks the pools, and down into the changing rooms and pool area. Separate swimming, diving and wading pools are asymmetrically arranged with a peripatetic sensibility on the open pool deck.

Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, University of São Paulo
Vilanova Artigas and Carlos Cascaldi, 1961

The FAUUSP is a split-level building stitched together by a set of wide, stacked ramps. The program areas look onto an open social space in the center. The interior space is wrapped in a concrete envelope that is lifted up on papery pillars to maintain the continuity of the ground plane.
Swimming Pool at Leça de Palmeira
Alvaro Siza, 1966

Siza’s pools are delicately inserted into the rocky coast of Portugal. The entry to the pool is choreographed to lose and gradually regain views of the horizon line. The visitor makes hairpin turns through the dressing room, proceeding toward the sea. This sequence culminates in an optical illusion that the pool edge is continuous with the ocean beyond.

Bellinzona Public Swimming Pool
Aurelio Galfetti, 1967

At Bellinzona, the changing rooms are tucked under a pedestrian bridge that connects the town to the Ticino river. The pools are arranged on a generous, flat field below. They are connected by smaller walkways that echo the main bridge.
Kunsthall Rotterdam
OMA, 1986-91

The ramps that cut through OMA’s Kunsthall in Rotterdam draw visitors from the street to a rooftop garden. The magnetic upward pull of the ramps is destabilized by fleeting views across into adjacent program.

Inner City Arts
Michael Maltzan, 2008

The campus of Inner City Arts assembles a diverse set of forms in and around a courtyard. The relationships between the different masses define room-like exterior spaces. Positive and negative space are figured somewhat equally. The crisp white surfaces sharply model the Southern California sunlight, casting deep shadows throughout the day.
Appendix B: Case Study

Medellin Aquatic Center
Luis Callejas, Edgar Mazo, and Sebastian Mejia, 2008

This aquatic center was built for competition as well as for recreational use, so its pools all have viewing stands and are designated for different water sports. The pools sit at different heights, and pathways are embedded into the artificial landscape. The visitor goes from a narrow concrete corridor only open to the sky to the horizontal expanse of the elevated pool deck. The multiplicity of paths around the pools create a sense of constant movement without hierarchical procession.

Les Bains des Docks
Jean Nouvel, 2009

Located on formerly industrial waterfront in Le Havre, this pool creates a pristine interior world within a mute perimeter. Large skylights define darker and lighter, more intimate and more social areas. Walkways on the upper floor bridge over the pools, defining separate zones while maintaining spatial continuity. Reflective white ceilings reinforce the sense of weightlessness.