Reinventing Los Angeles

Nature and Community in the Global City

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1

Nature in the City

Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language.

—*Raymond Williams*[1]

Walking through a Cornfield

On a warm day in October 2005, with the brown haze of the polluted Los Angeles skyline above us, I arrived at the thirty-two-acre site that was just to the east of Chinatown and north of downtown Los Angeles and that had become emblematic of the quest for reinventing nature in Los Angeles. The Cornfield, as it was known, was the proximate site of the original *zanja madre*, the mother ditch that had diverted water from the Los Angeles River as it flowed past the site to serve the fields near the location of the original mission. Alternatively known as the Chinatown Yards and recently named the Los Angeles State Historic Park, the Cornfield had been prized for its choice location and its availability as undeveloped land—the single largest plot of land in Los Angeles that was capable of being developed. As a result, an intense battle had been waged between, on the one side, community and environmental activists, including L.A. River renewal advocates who dreamed of parks and open space adjoining the river, and, on the other side, a powerful and

well-connected developer with political allies, such as then Mayor Richard Riordan, who wanted to see warehouses and light industry on the site.[2]

This conflict was resolved in 2001 when the developer sold the land to the state of California. The transfer of ownership to the state, acting largely on behalf of the river-renewal advocates, was designed to turn the land into a state park commemorating its varied history, including its recent struggles. But planning such a park was complicated by an insistent and sometimes contending group of advocates, a state parks bureaucracy not used to the idea of developing a park in the heart of the city, and an unprecedented type of planning process required to establish the various uses for the park that were still to be determined. With expectations high and the slow process of planning the park beginning to create tensions, park officials were intrigued by the offer to temporarily house a public art installation. The funding for the project would be provided by the Annenberg Foundation, made possible in part by the fact that the artist, Lauren Bon, was also a member of the family and a trustee of the foundation.[3]

Though there was uncertainty about whether the site had actually been a cornfield in its earlier configuration, the name for the site had stuck. As a teenager growing up in Los Angeles, Bon had biked along the rail yards and had felt a connection to the site. After living abroad for a number of years, she had recently returned to Los Angeles and become fascinated by the myriad of players, including the artists, poets, and cultural activists who had embraced the cause of renewing the Los Angeles River and transforming the Cornfield into a public space. Bon's idea was to actually create a field of corn as a living sculpture and entitle it *Not a Cornfield*, to signify that her project would be temporary and not the ultimate signature of the park. A cornfield, for Bon, served as a "potent metaphor for those of us living in this unique megalopolis," as Bon described it on her *Not a Cornfield* Web site. The artist portrayed the project as a living landscape, and although the corn would not be harvested for consumption, given the concern about prior contamination of the land when it had been a railroad yard, plans were made to use the corn, after harvesting, for other uses.[4]

With her Annenberg resources and grand vision, Bon saw her art project as both active and reflective—building on a legacy of radical art while contributing to the quest to reinvent nature and community in the city as part of the perennial search for defining Los Angeles and locating its center. Located at the northern edge of downtown itself, the view from the Cornfield extended south to City Hall and the skyscrapers of downtown; west to the Chinatown stop of the new Gold Line rail line and the Chinatown commercial center of shops, restaurants, and dense housing; east to where the handful of warehouses gave way to the low-flung structures of the William Mead Homes low-income public housing project that extended into the Latino immigrant neighborhood of Lincoln Heights; and north to the majestic Broadway Avenue bridge and the channelized Los Angeles River as it made its way south through the eastern edge of downtown towards Boyle Heights and out to the ocean at Long Beach.[5]

Bon's concept was an ambitious one. To accomplish her goal, she imported 1,500 truckloads of earth to plant a million seeds and hired more than two dozen youth from the William Mead Homes to serve as community docents, while fending off criticism that she was simply a wealthy matron dropping in on a site that had such a long and protracted history of struggle and expectation. The corn grew throughout the summer, and small pathways between the rows of stalks provided routes within the site for joggers, bikers, and walkers through the field.

When I arrived that October, the corn was nine feet high, and the experience of walking through the cornfield was both surreal and invigorating. I knew the status of the cornfield was temporary and that the space would not ultimately become a form of urban agriculture, though the opportunity to create gardens on or near the site was available and a small plot of land had, separately, been dedicated for a native garden. The symbolism seemed uncertain, as with much of the goals of the project, both of which continued to change as new circumstances and demands came to the fore. But the site was also reminiscent of Carey McWilliams's characterization of Los Angeles as continually reinventing itself. For people who walked through the rows of

corn and looked back at the City Hall skyline through the high stalks, the idea of reinvention seemed tangible.[6]

Six years earlier, when it had been vacant land, dusty and unappealing, our Re-Envisioning the L.A. River program had sponsored a walking tour through the Cornfield site to the Broadway Bridge and the view of the L.A. River. The walking tour had included elementary students from the nearby Chinatown school, Castelar Elementary. The site was then bleak and forbidding, but the walk had been a hopeful event, with the children later discussing and imagining and drawing pictures of what a park—for an area that had no parks—could be like. Now six years later, with the corn stalks providing a landscape of improvisation, visitors could look at the City Hall skyline through the rows of corn and envision a type of reconstructed nature in the city, a scene both fleeting yet imbued with possibility.

The Language of Nature

If, as Raymond Williams has argued, *nature* is the most complex word in the English language, that's partly due to how its meanings and reference points are continually changing. Nature is not just in the eye of the beholder but also in the language used to describe what one sees. The English poet laureate of nature, William Wordsworth, spoke of the beauty of the Alps mountains in 1844 while opposing the construction of a railway that could despoil this "region of the Heavens," but earlier travelers voyaging through the same area made no mention of the Alps' beauty. They instead spoke of "precipitous rocks and mountains [that were] objects of dislike and fear," as Phil Macnaghten and John Urry noted. Definitions of nature change in relation to place. The English, Macnaghten and Urry point out, have defined nature in relation to the land, while Americans have focused on scenery. "To the European eye," they comment, "there is no countryside, only land. American farms [in contrast] are not sights of visual enticement; rather it is to the 'natural' scenery of the deserts and canyons, mountains and ravines, that the eye has been mainly drawn."[7]

During the 1950s and 1960s, environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society often utilized a language of nature as a scenic resource and spoke of the need to bring city residents to those scenic resources, given the absence of nature in the city. Subsequently, the rise of the predominantly urban-based environmental-justice movement began to have its influence on environmental discourse. The language regarding nature shifted to the extent that groups like the Sierra Club now spoke of "[saving] those smaller green places close to home from pollution and overdevelopment" as well as seeing both "big majestic places" as well as "everyday places" as places in nature.[8]

But the divide between nature and human activity still seemed to prevail in both language and action. The environmental-justice groups, for example, sought to disassociate themselves from what they perceived to be the common reference point for nature ("birds and bees") as distinct and ultimately detracting from their core concerns regarding polluted places and inequitable impacts. The nature-oriented big environmental groups, on the other hand, still focused on a language and policy framework to protect nature from unwanted human activity. Both types of environmental groups were not able to get beyond the distinction between nature and human activity that established a divide in relation to advocacy, policy, and resources as well as language. By maintaining that separation, environmentalists were caught in a bind, often forced to choose between being either a nature movement or a people-centered social movement rather than both.

This type of separation of the social and the natural could be traced historically with the rise of industrial society and the growth of cities, particularly in Western society. "Non-Western cultures have never been interested in nature; they have never adopted it as a category," argued French philosopher Bruno Latour in his discussion of Western science. "Most earlier ideas of Nature had included, in an integral way, ideas of human nature," the great English social critic, Raymond Williams, wrote in the same vein. But the rise of a market-dominated urban and industrial order transferred nature to a place "out there," without "[considering] very deeply what this reshaping might do

to men," as Williams put it. Separating humans from nature had become "incorporated into our dichotomous way of thinking," wrote the landscape historian and cultural critic J. B. Jackson. "It is a 19th century aberration," Jackson argued, "and in time it will pass."[9]

But the consequences of such dichotomous thinking have continued to be felt in multiple ways. The dichotomy, for example, between the natural sciences and the social sciences, according to Latour, produced a world of "social facts" and "natural facts." "Nature became separated from society," Latour argued, "in order to be scientifically studied, and ultimately tamed, and the world was separated into things natural (the objects of study of natural sciences) and things social (the objects of study of social sciences)." Moreover, nature, as a distinctive category, became itself a shifting target, dependent on the strategies designed to control it and the different perceptions of what it represented as a world apart. Different frameworks regarding how to define, relate to, and manage nature were also developed. The preservationist concept (save nature from human activity since human intervention or interaction inevitably despoils it) was first contrasted with the idea of managing nature as a type of resource to be more effectively and efficiently utilized for human activity, even as it continued to be defined separately.[10]

Both the preservationist and management or conservationist discourses, however, were not able to contend with continuing impacts related to changes in urban and industrial society. The preservationist concept was effectively a losing proposition, conceived as a defensive strategy to save what was left in the face of the inexorable expansion of urban and industrial activity that encroached on an untouched wilderness. During the 1950s and 1960s, key environmental figures like David Brower constructed their arguments around the ideas that little of the earth's surface remained as wilderness and that the goal of environmental policy was to protect as much of what remained as possible through legislation like the 1964 Wilderness Act. But even those efforts remained problematic as such legislation remained incomplete in its intended outcomes and contending forces such as oil and mining interests or land developers continued to covet the areas to be protected. Already by 1989,

New Yorker writer Bill McKibben would proclaim that nature, as a category set apart, had ended and that even in his Maine woods retreat he could witness human impact. This concern about an end to nature was further reinforced when startling impacts began to show up in what had been considered the most untouched areas. This included, for example, the discovery that polar bears in the Arctic region, particularly in their remote dens near the North Pole, had high concentrations of a number of toxic compounds such as polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs), toxic flame retardants produced in the United States that were among the hundreds of other pesticides and industrial chemicals that had been carried to the Arctic by northbound winds and ocean currents. This "end of nature" fear was even more pronounced in relation to some of the anticipated impacts from global warming, such as the melting of the hunting grounds of Alaskan polar bears and the discovery that some of them had begun to drown.[11]

The conservationist/management approaches have not fared much better from an environmentalist vantage point. Already by the 1950s, industry groups such as chemical manufacturers and government agencies such as the Bureau of Reclamation intent on building large dam projects were using the language of "resource management" and "conservation" to justify projects that had significant environmental impacts. By the 1970s and 1980s, organizations advocating under the banner of the Sagebrush Rebellion and acting on behalf of mining, grazing, and other development interests used the resource-management language of "wise use" as part of their argument for opening up federal government lands previously protected from development. This further shifted the language of "conservation" and "management" toward the realities of development and extraction. Even the more recent language of "sustainability" or sustainable management, with its explicit environmental intent to reduce environmental harms, faced the challenge of figuring out how to reduce the "ecological footprint" on nature, given the continuing acceptance of the nature/social divide; that is, the more human activity, the larger the footprint. Much of the sustainability discourse relied on a combination of technology and market forces in the pursuit of "ecological modernization"

strategies to achieve a state of sustainable development. But despite their faith in the capacity of technology and good corporate practices to achieve environmental goals and notwithstanding the rhetoric about protecting future generations, many of the sustainability advocates shared the pessimistic assumptions that this alternative development scenario would, at best, staunch the bleeding. Nature, once set apart, was destined, even with the most effective techniques, to remain wounded or seriously impaired.

Faced with this sense of impending loss, a revised language of ecological *restoration* emerged during the twentieth century, stimulated by the writings and activities of such diverse figures as Jens Jensen, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Aldo Leopold. Their approaches to the nature/human-activity divide, as well as the new types of environmental-management strategies that began to be devised in places like the national parks and the national forests, influenced the development of a discrete new field of the natural sciences called "restoration ecology" or "ecosystem restoration." Instead of a focus on slowing habitat loss or preventing the collapse of ecosystems, the restorationists sought to try to "reclothe the earth" by repairing ruptures in the landscape and reconnecting its parts. Landscapes are themselves hybrids since they are "worked, lived on, meddled with, [and] developed, [and thus require] human intervention and care," Alexander Wilson said of the logic of a restorationist approach.[12]

The hybrid argument was a key to the notion of restoration. "Partly artificial and partly natural, the restored landscape is not exactly either," argued William R. Jordan III, the editor of the journal *Ecological Restoration*. "It is rather, a landscape of ambiguity—the very place, we might suppose, where established identities are challenged and where relationship and community begin—yet a place where it seems we have been ill equipped either to recognize these opportunities or to take advantage of them." In this context, restoration ecology has sought to make a partial step towards overcoming the nature/human-activity divide, recognizing that its efforts have attempted not so much to save but to recover ecosystems that had otherwise been damaged or destroyed—a process that, in its most ambitious forms, could reproduce

nature by taking into account the necessity of human intervention. But for critics of the restoration approach who felt that ecological change was part of "an evolutionary process in normal time" but *without human intervention*, the ecological restoration movement was simply another example of "humanity's attempt to control the natural world," as Eric Katz put it. The result was less a landscape of ambiguity than a form of "fake nature," the critics argued, more similar to an art forgery than a new form of art.[13]

Both critics and advocates agreed that the language of ecological restoration forced us to reconsider the notion of what was "natural" and how and why it should be valued, which might well be the movement's most significant accomplishment. But the limits to ecological restoration have also become immediately apparent, both in relation to the opportunities available for restoration in urban areas (a kind of "ecological junk-picking," according to Jordan), as well as in the scale and the social context in which restoration efforts have taken place. The restoration approach—with its requirements for sufficient resources, available sites, and acceptable forms of intervention—has often needed to operate at a much smaller scale than the types of repairs that might otherwise have been required, given the broader-scale impacts from polluting industrial practices, global warming–related changes, major land-use changes, or the significant consequences from globalization policies and practices. Moreover, as Cindi Katz has argued, given the resources required and the circumstances often associated with a restoration approach, "[restoration ecology] has a tendency to privilege certain landscapes and land use practices," failing to account for the environmental-justice argument of the powerful changes in the urban and industrial environment that weigh most heavily in relation to class, race, and ethnicity.[14]

Given the limits of these different approaches and the continuing difficulty of overcoming this residual and deeply embedded notion of a nature/human-activity divide, the environmental movement has created a dilemma for itself. The persistence of this divide potentially marginalizes what Latour calls the "non-humans" from the political sphere that has otherwise been the domain of human activity. Although trees might have standing in

certain limited legal contexts and strategies around sustainable development or ecological restoration provide some partial relief to the notion that human activity inevitably impacts negatively the separate domain of nature, the divide ultimately shortchanges both sides: polluted environments, loss of green space, the exploitation and alienation of labor, traffic congestion, the urban heat-island effect, and global warming, to name just a few, are all visible by-products, inadequately addressed. To overcome the divide, a new type of politics, what Latour and others have defined as "political ecology," needs to emerge that would allow for an integrated approach. By doing so, nature can then be construed as multidimensional and occurring in multiple spheres and places, whether city or countryside, urban or suburban, active or passive park uses, undeveloped lands or built environments, or other places where people live, work, or play. The land, Aldo Leopold famously commented, itself constitutes "a community to which we belong." To define nature, then, is to define the social, cultural, and natural spheres as one—to recognize, as Raymond Williams put it, that the idea of nature "contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history . . . both complicated and changing, as other ideas and experiences change."[15]

Urban and Suburban Natures

During the twentieth century, the idea of nature was significantly influenced first by dramatic population shifts from the countryside to the city and then, in the later half of the century in the United States, by shifts from city to suburb. Urban places had long been considered the antithesis of the natural. The rise of the industrial city in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was continually subject to withering commentary, with descriptions of how these urban "lowlands," as John Muir called urban places, represented unimaginable assaults on nature and community. Such urban places also represented assaults on the senses: nineteenth-century London, John Ruskin wrote, was a "great foul city . . . stinking—a ghastly heap of fermenting brickwork, pouring out poison at every pore." Lewis Mumford, in his biting commentary on the

nineteenth-century industrial city, was equally emphatic about the kinds of foul discharges that polluted every aspect of the urban environment and turned urban rivers into a "flood of liquid manure." What passed for nature in the city—the air, the water, and the land—had become fully subordinated to the factory, Mumford argued, and "a pitch of foulness and filth was reached [in the working-class neighborhoods] that the lowest serf's cottage scarcely achieved in medieval Europe." Yet nature outside the city in the countryside was also, in nineteenth-century England, "rich with odours, of farm animals, raw sewage, rotting vegetables, smoke, stagnant water, and so on," Macnaghten and Urry point out, suggesting that even this conception of nature in the industrial city as a set of smells and other sensory perceptions was socially constructed. In the United States, the urban/nonurban contrast was not so much a city/countryside distinction as the depiction of nature as located in those areas not settled.[16]

The divide between nature and human activity was often viewed, through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as an urban/nature split. Even urban reform advocates during the Progressive Era such as the settlement house reformers like Jane Addams and the "garbage lady" Mary McDowell who promoted playgrounds, municipal bathhouses, sanitation reform, and other urban environmental initiatives, saw the industrial city of the early twentieth century as "unnatural" and obviously and desperately in need of reform. For the settlement house movement, "fresh air" and any form of green space was a welcome relief from the crowded and polluted cities like Chicago that still shared many of the characteristics of Ruskin's "foul city" of nineteenth-century London. But the Progressive Era reformers also took the existence of the city as a given, and their focus was less on escape from the city than on changing the conditions in which people lived, whether in relation to housing, the work environment, or the need for recreational places like parks and playgrounds.[17]

During the first half of the twentieth century, many of the efforts to reform the city, led by the regional planning movement, appeared essentially to be exercises in rescaling its size and composition (what the garden city

advocates called "the cosmopolitan city of scale") and in remaking the relationship between city and countryside or the urban/nature interface. Part of their argument was dependent on the new technologies of transportation such as the automobile that they hoped would allow a more seamless connection between the city and nature (the "townless highway," Benton MacKaye called it, promoting the idea that car travel to and from the city would encourage an appreciation of and connection to nature). The scale argument also identified the need for a more self-contained city where parks and green space, people, and industry could coexist.[18]

But already by the 1940s, the garden city was quickly becoming the garden suburb, while a place like Radford, New Jersey (the original showcase of the regional planners), was turning into the mass-produced Levittown. As opposed to the streetcar suburbs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the most visible and influential of the new suburbs of the post–World War II era were the automobile suburbs—new developments that were located at the urban edge rather than within the urban core and in relation to their proximity to the highway rather than the streetcar. At the same time, the growth of the automobile suburbs extended and in some case revised the definition of an urban place as encompassing a new kind of continually expanding and changing urban area. This "supercity," as the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* boasted of the rapidly expanding Los Angeles region in 1960, would eventually stretch from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border. Such metropolitan regions included both inner-city areas and outer suburbs continually stretching outward, creating what one critic called the "100-mile city." The contrast between the urban core (dense, polluted, and lacking green space) and the automobile suburbs (whose landscapes and street designs sought to create the impression of a reconnection to nature) also provided a contrast between what came to be called the "brownfields" of the inner cities and the "greenfields" of the suburbs.[19]

The nature motif of the automobile suburbs was a constant theme that was heavily promoted by developers, in news stories, or in films or television shows. While whole new planned developments were seen as surrounded by

nature and open space, they were often placed in areas that reduced farmland or the open spaces at the edges of the expanding urban borders. This juxtaposition of the suburban search for nature coming at the expense of the loss of open space and farmland was particularly prominent in the case of Los Angeles. While Los Angeles was not the only metropolitan area that featured the development of the automobile suburb, the city's boosters celebrated how its new roadways could break "the wild virgin areas of Southern California . . . to the uses of progress, yielding up their beauties to the motoring public," as the *Los Angeles Times* described it in 1933. A decade later, the L.A. region would fully symbolize the association of the post–World War II suburbs with the dynamics of automobile-induced sprawl and the search for a reconnection with nature as a suburban amenity. In the process, Los Angeles also experienced its rapid loss of farmland (declining from one of the largest to one of the smallest agricultural counties in California between 1930 and 1960), major changes to what biologists and forest managers characterized as the wildland/urban interface and a range of new "natural" hazards such as debris flows stimulated by the erosion of the chaparral owing to fires in forest lands abutting the new developments.[20]

The development of the new automobile suburb of Westlake at the Los Angeles and Ventura County line provides a good illustration of the search for nature and community in the automobile suburbs. Westlake was designed in the mid-1960s as a self-contained city, situated off the recently competed section of the Ventura freeway on land that had a long and storied history as open space, cattle range, and an open-air location for such movies and television shows as *Robin Hood*, *King Rat*, *Laredo*, *Gunsmoke*, and *Bonanza*. In 1963, a developer, the American-Hawaiian Steamship Company, working with the Prudential Insurance Company, bought the land from the Albertson Ranch and immediately commissioned the development of a master plan to create what the developers called "a city in the country."[21]

The key claim underlying the development of this automobile suburb, initially called "The City with No Limits," was its core goal of not "[despoiling] the land." The homes to be built would be situated on "curving

cul-de-sac streets clustered along broad greenbelts and natural open areas," as one favorable *Los Angeles Times* article proclaimed. The developers asserted that Westlake would maintain "all the rolling hillocks, the ancient oaks, [and] the glittering streams," while adding "thousands more trees and bushes and flowers." The initial neighborhood was called "The Park." A core attraction for the new suburban homesteaders was its newly constructed lake, especially designed for an area that experienced limited rainfall and long dry seasons that extended late into the fall. This would be situated in the heart of what had been the 12,000-acre Albertson Ranch in order to create eight miles of shoreline by importing water through the new city's connection to the large regional water agency, the Metropolitan Water District, and by also diverting water from a stream that ran through the property. Designed by the Bechtel Corporation, the lake would be made possible by removing 50,000 cubic yards of alluvial soil and by constructing a dam site consisting of 30,000 cubic yards of concrete that would be 700 feet in length and 40 feet high. The 2,000 boat slips that would be made available for residents would allow them, with their newly created access to lake water, to fish, go boating, and enjoy the lengthy dry season.[22]

By building what became the eighty-second city to be incorporated in Los Angeles County, along with the residential homes in their cul-de-sacs, the lake, the eleven golf courses, the ten tennis courts, and the hiking trails and access to nature, Westlake Village was also representative of the dilemma of the automobile suburb. In its search for a connection to nature and community, this newly constituted suburb/city was also associated, from its very origins, with stretching the urban boundary and thereby lengthening the automobile commute, intensifying the continuing search for an increased imported water supply, finding itself subject to sudden and massive fires at the end of the dry season, and ultimately reinventing the notion of what constituted open space and "natural areas." The development of Westlake Village, as with so many other automobile suburbs, underlined the notion that nature was continually being reinvented through, and as an extension of, human activity. This activity was itself a product of a market-driven system that turned the "natural

area" into increased property value and created a broad array of environmental hazards, including "natural" occurrences that market economists called externalities but that were part of the very fabric of the new automobile suburbs.

The automobile suburb at the outer edge of the urban boundary, however, was just part of Los Angeles' urban-suburban continuum of places that maintained an uncertain relationship to nature. Suburban development that emphasized its "natural surroundings" occurred early in the twentieth century in Los Angeles and elsewhere in places like Bel Air and Palos Verdes Estates. These "restricted suburbs," characterized by their various rules imposed on each residence, were designed to attract a wealthier constituency. Restrictions included prohibitions on certain land uses (such as farm animals and other agricultural activities) and limits on potential buyers designed to also keep certain people out (such as nonwhites and lower-class Angelenos).[23]

By the 1920s, Los Angeles had also established what its planners called "suburban-industrial clusters." Associated with the growth of new manufacturing centers like the oil and aircraft industries, these blue-collar or working-class suburbs were also spatially dispersed according to streetcar service and industry location decisions. The difference was that these working-class suburbs were primarily designed as manufacturing hubs that provided residences for its workers—working-class bedroom communities defined by their connection to industry but without schools, libraries, churches, or parks.[24]

These suburban-industrial clusters were made possible in part because of the scattered development patterns of Los Angeles that predated the construction of the freeways that would subsequently become prominent in the development of the automobile suburbs. As late as 1940, just as the great manufacturing boom in Los Angeles began to take off, more than a third of the subdivided property still remained vacant, providing ample opportunities for the siting of large manufacturing plants and the development of the new working-class suburbs. The key to these developments was the association with the workplace and the centrality of the home. "To workers in 1920s Los

Angeles," Becky Nicolaides wrote of these working-class suburbs, "a home represented independence, a goal valued in both American and immigrant traditions." Even the first of the suburban-industrial clusters, like the cities southeast of downtown Los Angeles such as Huntington Park and South Gate that had been developed as part of the industrial districts designated along the L.A. River, reinforced the connection between work and home that was absent in the automobile suburbs. At the same time, the connection to nature, given the more dense and compact development, was limited to the home environment, primarily through backyard gardens often designed as functional and edible self-provisioning landscapes.[25]

As these inner- and outer-ring suburbs sought to establish their different kinds of connections to nature, urban-core or inner-city areas also witnessed important though uneven efforts on behalf of reclaiming or reinventing an urban nature. This included a handful of planned communities in the Los Angeles area, such as Baldwin Hills Village (currently called "The Village Green") that was established in 1942 and modeled as a type of Garden City seeking to establish a community environment based on social and political equality. The Village's original 630 row houses and apartments were arranged in an S-like formation around garden courts, tree-shaded malls, and three central greens, with automobiles confined to the periphery of the development. Even after the 1963 flood that significantly impacted the Village and much of the surrounding area, the homes were largely restored to correspond to some of their original design features. Though a modest shift toward more parking and garage spaces has since occurred, the Village Green has maintained much of the original intent of the design to establish an integration of green space, public space, and private homes. The core of the Village constitutes "an oasis of pedestrian calm," as Mike Davis puts it, celebrating this design of a "democratic community" that contrasted with Los Angeles' ever expanding land mass dedicated to the automobile. In his otherwise noir assessment of Los Angeles in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, Davis argued that at every level of its organization, Baldwin Hills Village attained a design that sustained "a superb dialectic between private

and communal space" and remains one of "Los Angeles's most vibrant neighborhoods."[26]

But Baldwin Hills Village was clearly more the exception than the dominant form of development and land use in Los Angeles, especially with the region's enormous expansion in population and subdivided land after the 1940s. Los Angeles' loss of green space, farmland, and open space was staggering and contributed to its post–World War II reputation as the capital of sprawl and the leading edge of environmental degradation. It was the site of the first massive urban air pollution episode in 1943, it saw the rise of the most intricate and extensive urban freeway system in the world by the 1960s, it channeled its rivers and streams and polluted its bays in a manner that was both aesthetically unappealing and indicative of the prevalence of the flood-control and sewage-discharge functions over any other purpose such as the planting of trees along the channel, and its officials and business leaders focused on paving and subdividing and traffic flows and congestion, rather than parklands or public places, greenbelts or open spaces. *Development* became the buzzword; polluted landscapes the outcome. Urban Los Angeles was assumed to be bereft, with a few exceptions, of urban nature. It came to represent by the 1970s the worst fears of environmentalists—urban places that symbolize the loss of nature.

The primary areas of concern for L.A.'s mainstream environmentalists led by middle-class homeowners were the remaining large open spaces and undeveloped coastal areas still accessible within the urban boundaries of Los Angeles, such as the Santa Monica Mountains and Santa Monica Bay. During the 1960s and 1970s, developers and their political allies waged fierce battles against open-space advocates and their political allies who sought to place strict limits on development and maintain wildlife corridors, nature trails, and other environmental amenities in the Santa Monica Mountains. The battleground over the coastal areas was even fiercer, resulting in a sharply contested but ultimately successful statewide ballot initiative in 1972 to protect the coast from development and provide public access to the beaches. Pollution from sewage outfalls and industrial waste discharges also remained a constant threat

to the coast. Partly in response to those issues, working-class communities bordering or adjacent to the coast, including the working-class suburbs that had been established during the post–World War II manufacturing and housing booms, began to mobilize around the emissions and discharges from the nearby oil refineries, pesticide manufacturing plants, and aircraft plants. Two sets of issues came to be linked to two types of movements: (1) discharges and emissions that led to the development of local, ad hoc neighborhood groups and (2) environmental groups focused on the discharges that had contributed to the ocean pollution and marred beaches that had undermined Los Angeles's reputation as the "land of sunshine" and "outdoor living" so celebrated by its boosters.[27]

Both of these types of movements expanded significantly during the 1980s and 1990s as the pollution and discharge problems affecting the coast and nearby communities became increasingly visible and contested. Heal the Bay, a key middle-class-based local environmental group, first took shape after a high school teacher who was also a surfer began to challenge the failure of the United States Environmental Protection Agency to enforce the Clean Water Act in relation to sewage and industrial discharges into the bay. Along with other ocean-protection groups like the Surfrider Foundation and Santa Monica Baykeeper, Heal the Bay successfully forced a change in the operation of the major sewage-treatment plant along the coast, organized coastal cleanup days, established environmental report cards for the beach areas along the coast, and focused on water conservation and other development-related environmental "best practices" to reduce the amount of polluted runoff that made its way to the bay.[28]

In contrast to the middle-class-based groups that focused on protection of important environmental amenities such as the ocean and mountain areas ringing the urban core, neighborhood-based working-class and low-income groups also emerged in Los Angeles to focus on the pollution that was impacting their homes and communities. These polluted environments were impacted by the discharges from industrial plants, the diesel-belching truck traffic from

the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, and the noise and air pollution associated with the industrial corridors that dotted parts of the coast as well as much of the southern, central, and eastern parts of inner-city Los Angeles. This new type of environmental-justice movement that took root during the 1980s and 1990s in Los Angeles and other areas around the country consisted primarily of place-based movements whose members wanted protection for their own places—homes, families, and communities. Although groups like Heal the Bay, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and Environmental Defense embraced some of the language and the focus of the environmental justice groups, the distinction nevertheless remained, in some subtle and not so subtle ways, between a primarily nature-focused (the ocean and mountains) and a people-focused (home and community) urban environmental politics.[29]

The main area where the different environmental groups seemed to converge was around the question of open space *in the heart of the city* (rather than just at its edge or along the coast). In the late 1990s, both sets of groups began to talk about the need for public places—parks, community gardens, green spaces, a revitalized L.A. River—that could address the need for more livable places in the city. New coalitions were established, and a stronger urban environmental politics that was at once place-based and focused on green and open spaces seemed possible. And Los Angeles, the symbol of environmental degradation and the absence of nature in the city, became one of those urban places where this new politics began to take root.[30]

Green Spaces

If Los Angeles is to become a green city, as its current mayor continually predicts, it needs to establish green spaces where its residents live, work, and play. Among those spaces, lawns, gardens, trees, and parks are most visible. How such spaces are designed, constructed, accessed, and integrated into everyday life can tell us how such an urban greening agenda is able to reinvent or fail to prevent further impairment of what passes as nature in the city.

Lawns

For many of L.A.'s residents, the idea of urban nature, particularly nature in the automobile suburbs, begins with the front lawn—what one lawn-promotion group calls "your own little piece of the earth."[31] The well-kept, highly manicured, pesticide-laden, weed-free, grassy lawn has become a quintessential American phenomenon. "Nowhere in the world are lawns as prized as in America," writes Michael Pollan in his discussion of how lawns and gardens have come to represent a form of "second nature." "Like the interstate highway system, like fast-food chains, like television," Pollan argues, "the lawn has served to unify the American landscape." This "American obsession," as the lawn's historian, Virginia Scott Jenkins, also characterized the lawn phenomenon, has especially become a manufactured form of suburban nature. It is also a target of opportunity for those industry and development interests that see the industrial lawn, as this manufactured piece of the earth is called by some, as both a profit center and an extension of the suburban connection to nature as green space.[32]

Until the twentieth century, lawns were associated with opulent European creations signifying wealth or royalty or both. The first major effort to overcome the problem of introducing and maintaining a durable, weed-free grassy lawn came about through a collaboration, in the period just prior to World War I, among the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Golf Association, and the Garden Club of America to try to identify which type of grass or combinations of grass could best provide the type of lawn required for golf courses. Around this time, Frederick Winslow Taylor, the promoter of scientific management and the standardization of work and also an avid golfer, sought to apply his shop techniques to create a uniform, lawn-based putting surface with "a longer and more velvety turf." Standardization became the key for both golfer and home owner. After a hiatus in lawn development from World War I through the Depression and World War II, the connection between golf course and lawn combined with the widespread development of golf courses as part of the automobile suburbs helped jump start a new phenomenon that would soon sweep suburban America: the closely cropped

manicured lawns for golfers and the neatly kept, standardized front lawn of the suburban home.[33]

For many of the suburban developers, the lawn became central to the character and identity of the suburban home. Part private space, representing the individual's connection to a well kept nature, and part public space that helped define the suburban community in relation to its aesthetic and "natural" look, the lawn served as a symbol of nature and community in the suburb. The "supergreen lawn look" that emerged during the 1950s paralleled the growing introduction of brightly colored consumer products such as hot pink cars, both of which, as Ted Steinberg points out, became status symbols. At the same time, the lawn became a kind of quasi-regulatory instrument to maintain that look and that uniformity. Almost from the outset of the development of the post–World War II suburbs, residents came to serve as gatekeepers who complained about any lawns that were not well maintained by their neighbors.[34]

This powerful association of lawn with suburb greatly stimulated the growth of the lawn-care market. Increasingly in urban and suburban settings, land cover became lawn cover, with as much as 23 percent of urban land cover represented by lawns. To feed and maintain these lawns, the market in residential lawn care alone amounted to more than $4 billion within a $35 billion lawn and garden market. It also extended to such products as chemical fertilizers and pesticides, with estimates ranged from an average of three to twenty pounds of fertilizer and between five to ten pounds of pesticides applied each year per lawn. More than twenty million acres of residential lawns came to be planted, served by an increasingly concentrated turf and lawn-care business.[35]

The environmental consequences of the development of these industrial lawns have been staggering. One environmental assessment evaluated the industrial lawn's different inputs (fossil-fuel energy, irrigation water, fertilizer, pesticides, grass seed, sod, and so forth) and outputs (carbon dioxide emissions, surface-water runoff that included pesticide and fertilizer residues, solid waste from grass clippings, and so on) and called it the dark side of the lawn's

evolution. As one example, the assessment cited a California Air Resources Board (CARB) estimate from the early 1990s of the amount of fossil-fuel energy used to mow a lawn during a one-hour period as representing the equivalent of the amount of pollutants emitted by driving a car 350 miles. According to CARB, the annual emissions of all lawn machines in California were equivalent to the emissions of 3.5 million 1991 model automobiles, each driven 16,000 miles during the year.[36]

Parallel to the concerns that had developed regarding suburban sprawl, the growing awareness of the lawn's negative environmental impacts created concerns within the lawn-care industry that led to the search for new marketing and product-innovation strategies for their product. This was particularly the case of the industry leader, the Scotts Company, which had been the first to patent Kentucky Bluegrass, had taken over a number of lawn-care products and brand names (such as Miracle-Gro, Ortho, and Smith and Hawken) and by 2005 had more than $2.3 billion in sales. Along with other industry players, the Scotts Company sought to deflect environmental concerns by claiming that lawns provided major environmental benefits and that "for most of suburban America, it's the foundation of the neighborhood's ecosystem," as the company Web site put it. New and aggressive marketing strategies sought to manipulate consumer concerns by associating the aesthetics of intensive lawn care with "community, family, and environmental health," as Paul Robbins and Julie T. Sharp argued, while industry groups established new public relations initiatives, such as the development of the Project EverGreen alliance, to fend off environmental attacks.[37]

More recently, the development of genetically engineered lawns, including a pesticide-resistant strain of grass that would enable lawn owners to massively spread pesticides on their lawns to kill any persistent weeds, has emerged as the latest version of the industrial lawn. The Scotts Company has pursued this development in collaboration with the world's leading biotech company, the Monsanto Corporation, which had been eagerly marketing its genetically engineered "Roundup Ready" seed to farmers. This product was designed to make plants, like corn and soybeans, resistant to Roundup, Monsanto's best-

selling pesticide on the market. Scotts, as part of its deal with Monsanto to acquire Ortho from Monsanto, had also purchased the exclusive U.S. distribution rights for Roundup Ready. The Scotts/Monsanto collaboration then resulted in the development of a grass seed product designed to allow golf course managers to "control their weed problems with a single herbicide," as a Scotts spokesman put it.[38]

The idea of a genetically engineered lawn immediately generated opposition from critics of the biotechnology products and from those who were seeking to develop an alternative approach to the industrial lawn. Scotts, aware of the increasingly vocal opposition to any products that used the term *biotechnology* or *genetically engineered*, instead sought to identify their new products as "superior plants" but without much success. The genetically engineered lawn label, or "frankenlawn" as its critics also called it, stuck, with research indicating that genetically engineered grass could cross-pollinate with wild grasses, potentially creating herbicide-resistant superweeds. As opposition grew, the genetically engineered lawn promoters sought to make a strategic retreat by temporarily withdrawing their product, though they still hoped that the industrial lawn would continue to be accepted as the leading example of a manufactured suburban nature.[39]

Beyond the issue of the genetically engineered lawn, the industrial lawn has continued to be challenged. In Canada, more than eight municipalities passed laws that either banned or severely restricted the use of pesticides for lawn care. "The consequences to the professional lawn care industry in Canada have been huge," one trade publication said of these municipal initiatives that also caused concern among lawn-care industry groups in the United States. Within the United States, in one highly symbolic confrontation in 2003, a homeowner in one of L.A.'s well known working-class suburbs, the appropriately named Lawndale, planted cactuses, roses, sage scrub, and fruit trees, refused to use pesticides, and created a jungle of native plants and shrubs. The city decided to issue a citation for "excessive overgrown vegetation in [her] front yard" and told the owner to "cut all overgrown grass and weeds." After the threat of legal action and support for the owner from a number of city

residents, the city backed down and allowed the plants to be left intact, while the owner agreed to trim when appropriate. Advocates for water conservation, antitoxic garden chemicals, and native plants began to speak of a "landscape ethic" that questioned the water- and pesticide-intensive lawn and promoted the use of native plants. The giant Metropolitan Water District, not previously known for encouraging alternative strategies regarding water use, introduced in 2002 a "native plant" incentive program for nurseries that also extended to individual homeowners. But perhaps in the biggest blow yet to the industrial lawn was an important shift among its core constituency. As a November 2005 *New York Times* article noted, some homeowners began to pave over their lawns to make room for the ubiquitous—and more demanding (of space)—automobile. Indeed, as the article described it, "paving over has become so commonplace that it is spurring differences between neighbors and debates within households about whether to dispense with the lawn." The battle between car and turf had been joined.[40]

Gardens

If the industrial lawn could be considered environmentally problematic, the garden in contrast evokes strong associations regarding the human connection to the land. For Michael Pollan, the garden best conveyed his idea of "second nature," arguing that gardens can provide a road map for understanding how people "fit into nature." Cultivating small plots of land to grow plants or food, whether as part of the back yard in a home or on a vacant lot transformed into a community garden, has continued to be one of the few opportunities for urban residents to establish a bit of green space in the city.[41]

Gardens have often reflected the changing class and ethnic dynamics of urban areas like Los Angeles. Dolores Hayden, in her discussion of urban landscapes, points out that the early working-class suburbs in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century often consisted of small front gardens and rear yards that were intensively cultivated. Ethnic and working-class neighborhoods "could be identified by their plantings and the varied delights of ethnic kitchen gardens," Hayden wrote, contrasting those gardens with the

"exotic landscapes and flower gardens of the elite in the borderlands and picturesque enclaves." The homes of the poor in the eastside districts bordering the L.A. River, including the "foreign districts" of immigrants, for example, often consisted of "single cottages with dividing fences and flowers in the front yard, and oftentimes with vegetables in the backyard" according to one 1907 observation, by City Beautiful advocate Dana Bartlett. These were "homes for the people; pure hearts for pure hearth stones," Bartlett argued. Many of the homes occupied by Mexicans in the eastside districts were seen as "garden spots, a wealth of flowers and vegetables providing an inspiring contrast to the hideous, jammed, foul-smelling courts of New High, Alameda, Olivera [sic], North Broadway, and other streets near the heart of the city," another commentator remarked. Gardens as a food source in this period thus represented a key dimension of the working-class home. Becky Nicolaides, in her history of South Gate, pointed out that the "food produced in backyard gardens was consumed at home, sold and bartered [since] home consumption made good economic sense for working class residents."[42]

While working-class gardens were cultivated primarily as a private source of food, Progressive Era reformers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries promoted the notion of gardens as community building as well as food-provision enterprises. Unlike the private home gardens, these involved community activities designed to meet particular social needs. Detroit's potato patch gardens in the 1890s provided a source of food in the wake of a major economic depression; the United States garden army during World War I and the victory gardens during World War II were designed as civic enterprises contributing to the expansion of food sources during war time (including home gardens redefined for their social purpose); and school gardens during the first two decades of the twentieth century were established in part to build character through discipline and good work habits while also enabling a new generation of urban school children to understand and appreciate what was otherwise considered a rural experience.[43]

Similar to the expansion of the lawn-care industry after World War II, the home garden, especially the suburban garden, emerged as a new industry

segment. While lawn herbicides guarded against the unwanted weed, chemical pesticides were introduced into the suburban garden to fight the intrusion of pests, while nitrogen fertilizers aimed to increase the capacity of the soil to grow the various exotics and other plants that became the garden's standard items. Public gardens tended to be limited to ornamental displays next to places like office buildings, commercial centers, or amusement parks that were less community spaces than private landscapes for public display.

In contrast to these trends, a new urban-based focus on gardens as community places began to reappear during the 1960s and 1970s as part of a broader social movement concerned about the loss of green space and the desire for environmental renewal in the cities. The community-garden movement took root in nearly all major urban areas over the next three decades, stimulated by a growing interest in urban food and urban greening issues. In Los Angeles, an advisory body, the Los Angeles Food Security and Hunger Partnership (LAFSHP), was established in 1996 to provide food-related policy and programmatic advice to the mayor and the City Council. As part of its focus, the LAFSHP, which I served on during its brief tenure, developed a community-garden policy statement that was designed to address barriers to gardens (such as water hook-up and service fees) as well as possible strategies to ensure that existing community gardens would not be eliminated on the basis of competing claims on the land and to identify opportunities to expand the land available for gardens.[44]

The LAFSHP proposals, however, were not acted on at the time, and many of the community-garden sites remained vulnerable to market forces that sought to capture the land, often made more valuable after community gardens had been introduced. Nevertheless, community gardens still maintained their reputation as an effective "urban greening" and community-building, community-stabilization strategy for remaking vacant or abandoned land, reintroducing green space, and creating a small number of public gathering places. The key barrier was that market-driven land-use policies, reflective of what Dolores Hayden called the "constant production of urban space," often trumped the causes of urban greening, community food security, or the

social value of establishing community and public places. Most of the significant battles around community gardens were defensive in nature and sought to stave off new efforts by developers and other economic interests to secure or resecure the property. Those initiatives that were most successful were often established in abandoned and barren sites on existing public lands or even in public parks in places where there had been little or no upkeep.[45]

However, the future of urban community gardens, both as a community strategy to "fit with nature" and as a type of urban agriculture, does not appear entirely bleak. In the past decade, innovative types of urban gardens have begun to be established, particularly involving immigrant or ethnic groups such as the Hmong, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, or Mexicans and Central Americans who have drawn on their own traditions and connections to the land and to farming. At the same time, the rise of an urban-based environmental-justice politics—and justice-oriented language regarding access to resources—has also begun to influence more mainstream environmental groups involved in land-use issues. These include groups like the Trust for Public Land (which established an active program in a number of urban areas) and similar community land trusts engaged in acquiring urban sites from private developers or third parties (and then sometimes selling the land back or creating some kind of trust arrangement with a public agency or local or state government). The urban land trusts have been able to save and maintain some of the most visible of the community garden sites, as in New York City when the Trust for Public Land, together with the actress Bette Midler, was able to stave off the dismantling of hundreds of gardens owing to the threat by the administration of Rudy Giuliani to sell off a number of the publically owned sites that had been turned into and maintained, sometimes for years, as community gardens in the city. In Los Angeles, community-garden and urban-park advocates have successfully lobbied the city to establish and provide modest funding for increasing the availability of land for community gardens and pocket parks and have advocated for and designed innovative public gathering places such as small benches dotted with planter gardens.[46]

These efforts might have appeared minimal or even insignificant given the enormous reach of the paved hardscape, much of it the result of the massive amounts of land dedicated to automobile uses, as well as the power of the land developers to shape and control land markets. Land sites available for gardens, particularly in low-income areas, also have had to contend with contamination of the soil from prior uses or from emissions drifting from adjacent freeways. But while the number and the size of community gardens in Los Angeles has remained small and the barriers have appeared enormous, the range and diversity and sometimes unusual places for gardens and their strategies for survival nevertheless have reinforced the notion of "improvisation" and "reinvention" of land use and place.

Trees

Similar to the lawn and the garden, trees have been powerful landscape symbols. English aristocrats in the eighteenth century, as Henry Lawrence has noted, invested trees "with anthropomorphic attributes" and planted them"to commemorate the births and deaths of loved ones [while] their cutting was protested vigorously by those who valued them as much as their favorite pets." In the process, "trees became symbols of the possession of landed property; their management was a statement of its economic improvement."[47] In the United States, trees associated with forest lands in wilderness areas as well as in the rapidly growing urban centers were assumed to have a strong economic value. When Gifford Pinchot made his transition back to the United States in the late nineteenth century, fresh from managing wooded estates in Germany, he also evoked a language of economic value from the careful management of forest lands. During that same period, trees were also assumed to provide important economic benefits to urban areas as well. Tree plantings, including those seeded as part of the development of urban parks, "were sold on the grounds they enhanced everyone's property," Daniel Rodgers argued in his comparative study of European and U.S. approaches towards urban development. But trees also provided a powerful link to what its varied advocates considered to be a more sacred form of nature with its life-enhancing spiritual and aesthetic associations, whether in forest lands or in urban streetscapes. John Muir's evocation of the forest lands of Yosemite as a "fountain of life" and "holy temple" paralleled the promotion of trees and other forms of green space by progressive reformers and City Beautiful advocates as an aesthetic and live-giving force that provided relief to the otherwise dirty, noisy, sewage-laden, and polluted urban environments where the poor were concentrated.[48]

Though coveted for their role in increasing property values and for beautifying neighborhoods, already by the 1950s the urban forest concept and even suburban trees had begun to lose some of their luster among developers, residents, and local governments. Maintenance in urban areas became a costly problem because of cracked sidewalks, pest infestations, falling branches, and irrigation needs. Meanwhile, the reduction of native species, the importing of exotics or nonnatives like eucalyptus, and the encroachment of developments adjacent to forest lands created fire hazards in suburban and exurban areas. Bureaucracies charged with building freeways, ensuring traffic flow, or establishing and maintaining flood channels were quick to eliminate trees from their landscape planning if such trees interfered with the dominant purpose of those single-purpose agencies, such as moving traffic or channelizing rivers and streams. By the late 1980s, a U.S. Forest Service study of eleven cities indicated a limited—and declining—tree cover in the cities. If a tree grown in Brooklyn appeared to be a rare but welcome sight, as a popular book from the 1940s put it, then a tree in South Central Los Angeles and many other inner-city communities in the early 1990s was just as unusual a sighting.[49]

While the lack of green space, including trees, was not a defining issue with the civil disorders in Los Angeles in 1992 (daily life issues such as food insecurity, police-community relations, and lack of jobs weighed most heavily in neighborhoods like South Los Angeles), they nevertheless stimulated a new interest in trees and parks. Tree advocates had already become, prior to 1992, an important environmental force in Los Angeles, led in part by Andy and Kate Lipkis and their organization, Tree People. Founded in the early 1970s as a response to the dying off of trees in the San Bernardino Mountains, which

was caused by air pollution drift from Los Angeles, Tree People initially focused on tree planting as a strategy to fight air pollution and to provide a more aesthetically pleasing urban landscape and eventually began to influence policy initiatives around those objectives. The goal of planting one million trees, for example—one of Antonio Villaraigosa's "greening L.A." platform items in 2005—was initially put forth in 1981 as part of the South Coast Air Quality Management District's Air Quality Plan in response to the need to comply with federal Clean Air Act standards.[50]

Beyond the critical issue of air quality, a number of other social and environmental goals have been touted by urban tree advocates. Gary Moll, a vice president of the nonprofit group American Forests, calls trees the "ultimate urban multi-taskers." This includes their capacity to reduce carbon dioxide pollution, to generate energy savings by cooling buildings like schools, to reduce the urban heat-island effect, to limit the volume of stormwater runoff by providing shade and by reducing paved areas, to lower the decibel level of noise in the city, and to create a different kind of connection to place in areas that have had limited or no green space. Aside from parks, schools, and other easily identifiable and beneficial locations for shade trees, tree advocates have also explored the possibilities for trees to renew vacant lots, traffic islands and medians, and even outdoor parking lots, which remain almost invariably treeless in many urban areas while parked cars bake in the sun. These benefits, researchers note, outweigh the variety of costs associated with planting and maintenance.[51]

The connection to place became a key stimulus for other tree-advocacy organizations in L.A., such as Northeast Trees, which focused on tree planting, school garden development, and other urban greening strategies in the neighborhoods north and east of downtown Los Angeles, including the development of pocket parks and shade trees by the Los Angeles River. Both Tree People and Northeast Trees, as well as urban-park advocates who included tree planting as part of an overall strategy for reconstructing green space in the city, have helped strengthen the notion that urban environmental advocacy could and should appropriately focus on incremental yet still important greening strategies, including in inner-city communities where trees and green space are in short supply.

Parks

The urban-parks issue has been especially noteworthy in relation to this environmental-justice argument about the lack of green space in poor communities, and this argument has translated into a growing advocacy on behalf of more inner-city parks. This environmental justice approach, which focuses primarily on constructing small green spaces in dense urban-core areas, contrasts with the historical view dating back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that conceived of urban parks as "large landscape parks" or "pleasure grounds," such as Central Park in New York and Griffith Park in Los Angeles. These lands were set aside to provide residents with their first or only exposure to nature by simulating a rural or countrylike setting and thereby offering a place to escape the hardscape of the city. Such parks, often several hundred acres in size, were developed as early as the 1850s in places like New York, New Orleans, Cincinnati, and Hartford, Connecticut. Designed to serve as a kind of nature oasis, such large urban parks were initially situated at the periphery of the built-up area of the city, though over time new developments rose up around the parks, reinforcing their strong urban association. Furthermore, many of the sites, such as Chicago's South Park or San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, were selected because they were deemed "unusable for other purposes."[52]

During the Progressive Era and into the New Deal period, a second type of urban park emerged—the "reform park," as park historian Galen Cranz characterized it—to provide public places for recreation and outdoor use, particularly for the low-income immigrant neighborhoods in cities like Chicago, Milwaukee, and New York. This included a "park as playground" concept where the parks were far smaller in size (often just one to ten acres), had some paved areas for sports activities, and tended to deemphasize the connection to "nature" while providing for physical activity opportunities, places for seniors, and a "children's right to play."[53]

The reform parks became less prominent by World War II as urban parks increasingly needed to justify their existence as contributing to the economic well-being of the neighborhood and the city and to the welfare of its residents. Innovations in park use, such as the pageants and communitywide events during the Depression or the vegetable gardens planted in park grounds during the war, kept the reform park alive during the 1930s and 1940s. But from the post–World War II period through the 1950s and 1960s, planners and park designers primarily emphasized the recreational uses of parks, while establishing a less costly, more standardized design—what Cranz called "parkway picturesque"—that included "lawns and spotting of trees and shrubs."[54]

The 1960s witnessed a revival of urban parks as public spaces that included largely spontaneous events such as the be-ins in New York's Central Park. Community struggles to create green spaces out of vacant land or land to be paved over also erupted, symbolized by the 1969 People's Park fight in Berkeley. By the 1980s and 1990s, the reinvention of the urban park had become part of the environmental-justice agenda that included a demand for green space in areas where trash-strewn streets, contaminated land, and freeways that crisscrossed neighborhoods prevailed. Los Angeles, in particular, became an important environmental-justice battleground regarding parks since the city compared poorly with other cities in relation to park acreage per thousand residents, park space as a percentage of land in the city, and park expenditure per resident. Further, resources in the low-income districts compared unfavorably with less wealthy districts within the city, a situation that had been compounded by the passage in 1978 of Proposition 13 in California. That initiative, which limited the amount of property tax available to local governments (which had also been a key source of funding for park development and maintenance), compounded the equity issue. While wealthier areas could access additional funds by establishing user fees or through linkage or impact fees that tied the supply of new parks to fees on development, these mechanisms were less available or not utilized in inner-city communities. Thus, areas that had the greatest need for open space, given the constraints on street life owing to crime concerns, the absence of backyard

space to play, and schools that had eliminated recreational periods and had no green space in any case, found fewer resources to purchase land for parks or to maintain the few parks that were already established.[55]

This environmental-justice urban-parks movement extended the classic environmental-justice and civil rights–oriented arguments about unequal resources, risks, and burdens to call for the renewal of urban and community life through access to parks and green space. "The opportunity to establish some green space provided a way for us to feel connected again to our community," environmental-justice leader Penny Newman commented about her group's support of a new park and public space as part of a Superfund settlement regarding a nearby toxic-waste site. Like the Progressive Era social reformers, Depression-era pageant makers, World War II vegetable gardeners, and 1960s counterculture performers before them, urban-park advocates situated their claims around "quality-of-life" concerns, their approach seen as a quest to redefine and resituate nature as well as a sense of place in the city and the larger metropolitan region.[56]

Representing Nature

How nature reestablishes itself in the city can be influenced, as Alexander Wilson suggests, in how we talk about, imagine, conceptualize, and represent it. Nature might be described as a threat, felt as a loss, or seen as a life-giving and healing force, and each approach can influence certain kinds of outcomes. An urban nature agenda, then, needs to take into account how those representations are translated into action.

Urban Nature as Hazard

In the summer of 1995, a heat wave struck the Chicago area. Those who died were primarily the elderly and poor African Americans who lived in urban core neighborhoods in Chicago without air conditioning. The weather had been exceedingly hot, with temperatures as high as 105 degrees. Yet the Cook County chief medical examiner's conservative estimate of 465 deaths was

challenged by Mayor Daley, who didn't want the episode to be "blown out of all proportion." The mayor argued that to blame every death as heat-related was not "really real," since many of the deaths could have happened anyway. Others argued that the deaths could also have been caused by such factors as cloudless skies and the urban heat-island effect since highways, streets, tall buildings, and other paved surfaces produced significant changes in temperature in urban areas. But as Eric Klinenberg argued in his book *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, heat-wave-related social factors such as poverty, housing, governmental response, or cultural differences could not be separated from the heat wave as a natural hazard. This "environmentally stimulated but socially organized catastrophe" exposed social as well as natural fault lines.[57]

The 1995 Chicago heat wave raises the question of what constitutes a natural hazard and how or even whether the natural and the social can be distinguished. Ten years after the Chicago heat wave, the winds and the floods—and the breach of the levees—caused by Hurricane Katrina even more directly transformed the language and representation of what constituted a natural hazard. The physical geography of New Orleans has always defined the nature of this "unnatural metropolis," according to environmental historian Craig Colten, whose book by that name was published just months before Katrina struck. Colten makes the distinction between *resources* and *hazards* that often is made by geographers when analyzing the relationship between nature and human activity. When humans interact with nature to accomplish what would be considered positive outcomes (such as creating levees or damming a river to allow for development), then that relationship is assumed to produce resources, while negative outcomes (as when the levees break, and homes and lands are flooded) can define that same set of relationships as producing hazards. The literature on nature as hazard, in fact, assumes an a priori division between a "natural events system" ("the array of wind, water, and earth processes [that] functions largely independently of human activities and is an object of scientific inquiry in its own right by meteorologists, hydrologists, and geologists") and a "social system" that operates independently of natural events.[58]

But can the two systems be separated? When the 1994 L.A. earthquake (the city's most prominent natural hazard) occurred, the event's most direct effect was the collapse of a section of the heavily traveled Santa Monica Freeway. L.A.'s leadership immediately prioritized rebuilding this freeway segment, and its completion occurred rapidly and without any questions. The earthquake became a major hazard not simply owing to its magnitude but how it affected the city, while the response, given the central importance of freeways as part of L.A.'s built environment, reflected the desire to contain that effect and therefore the hazard. The representation and response to a hazard in a place like Los Angeles, with its propensity for fires, floods, debris flow, and extended dry periods, can be magnified when trying to separate nature from human activity. John McPhee, in his compelling discussion of the destruction to lives and property from the debris flow after heavy rains in the San Gabriel Mountains, argues in fact that the human manipulation of the environment (the "control of nature") is what establishes nature as hazard. Each of these events—earthquakes, rains, and debris flows in the Los Angeles region, hurricanes in the Gulf Coast, and Chicago heat waves—becomes dependent on the social context in which it takes place, while the actions taken in response serve to define the nature and extent of the hazard.[59]

Urban Nature as Nostalgia

When I first considered writing this book, I knew that I wanted to focus on the Los Angeles River and the recent initiatives to reenvision the river and the communities that surround it. I broached the idea with my editor at MIT Press, Clay Morgan, while we waited to be seated at Junior's Deli, a well-known Los Angeles gathering place. A man who was perhaps in his seventies was seated next to us in the waiting area, overheard the discussion, and began to tell us stories about catching tadpoles by the river's edge. His stories were a bit vague, but the nostalgia was striking and not unusual. Part of the power of the efforts to restore or at least modify the L.A. River's current state as concrete channel has been the power of nostalgia, the desire to undo the continuous loss of urban nature.

The nostalgia factor has been identified as one generation's evocation of a loss that came to be experienced as that generation grew older. Raymond Williams situated this sense of loss within generational terms. "The centuries-old appeal to nature has in fact reflected nostalgia for a visual and social world which existed thirty years previously," Williams wrote in *The Country and the City*. Fraser Harrison further connects the nostalgia about cultural loss with "the loss of each species or habitat [amounting] to a blow struck at our own identity." The term *nostalgia* is sometimes situated in negative terms as "a perversion of historical or biographical truth for the sake of cheap or gratuitous feelings," which could also be applied to this presumed loss of nature. But Harrison argues that the word's actual etymology (the Greek word *nostos* means "return home", and *algos* means "pain") provides a deeper and potentially liberating desire for reconnection. The nostalgia factor also suggests that the experience and loss of nature in the city is connected to a sense of place. How people see a loss of nature—or a connection to nature—depends on how they experience the material world itself, whether planting a garden in the city, hiking in nearby mountains, or imagining polar bears in Alaska drowning because of global warming. Although the nostalgia for nature may reflect a sense of loss that incapacitates, it can also, as has happened with the L.A. River, stimulate the desire for change and an agenda of renewal.[60]

Urban Nature as Health Promoting

Perhaps the most frequent association with nature is its healing powers. This is reflected, for example, in the arguments of the green psychologists who have documented how the presence of nature or green space can contribute to a sense of well-being in urban areas. Studies evaluating the impact of green space or its absence in such places as hospitals, prisons, apartment residences, or workplaces have shown that "providing a view, and especially one that includes vegetation, has positive implications for health and well-being," according to Rachel and Stephen Kaplan and Robert L. Ryan, leading figures in the field of green psychology. Conversely, these researchers argue, the absence of nature or the presence of an environment that undermines a connection to nature in the city (such as highways) can lead to symptoms like mental fatigue or road rage.[61]

Within this green psychology paradigm, one striking connection between health and well-being and access to green space has been the development of gardens as a form of *horticultural therapy* for veterans, the homeless, or domestic-violence victims. While these gardens have provided a fresh food source as well as an opportunity to be outdoors in a safe environment, they are seen as directly contributing to the participants' mental as well as physical health. Along these lines, UEPI undertook an initiative in conjunction with the California Department of Health Services to develop gardens and other food-provision programs at women's shelters. Working in the soil, one of the formerly abused participants said that her shelter's garden made her feel "as if the earth [was absorbing] negativity." "The garden gives me air," another shelter gardener commented. "I return to life. I stop now and notice the flowers." But urban greening initiatives are constrained by the limited availability of land for uses other than those associated with highest market value. Urban greening as a health-based strategy is often confined as solace and retreat from the demands of urban life instead of affirming opportunities to "fit into nature." As we discovered with the women's shelter program, nature as a healing force can be a powerful part of an affirmative urban nature agenda linking greening the city with a strategy for health and livability.[62]

Livelihood and Livability

One of the great parodoxes of Los Angeles is that it has come to symbolize the absence and loss of nature in the city while at the same time enjoying a rich abundance of what would otherwise be considered a feast of nature: mountains, ocean, rivers and streams, oaks and cottonwoods, and at one time willows, duckweed, and watercress bordering the Los Angeles River. Nature in Los Angeles has always provided an opportunity for that "constant production of urbanized space." In 1891, a short commentary in the *Los Angeles Times* captured the region's celebration of nature and parallel desire to remake

it. "Stretching away from the foot of the hill upon which you stand," the *Times* writer said of this L.A. panorama, "East Los Angeles looks like a vast forest or park, so thickly is it embowered in shade trees. To your left you get a fine view of Boyle Heights. On the north and east the scenery is striking in the extreme. Cutting its narrow passage through the high hills from the north flows the Los Angeles River. You can trace the valley as it opens out toward Burbank, above the mouth of the Arroyo Seco, down which ravine comes the mountain stream of that name from Pasadena, a portion of which city is visible. In the background are a succession of mountains, ending in the Sierra Madre, which from this point appear quite near. There rises in the mind of the beholder the thought: What a magnificent site for a big hotel!"[63]

"Nature has had a mixed career in Los Angeles," writes Roger Keil, a statement that could be extended to other metropolitan regions where nature in the city also appears problematic. Part of the difficulty for urban environmentalists has been the way that urban nature itself is characterized and valued—as places or lands that are set aside from the rest of urbanized space, whether workplaces, freeways, parking lots, houses, schools, or flood-control channels. One difficult and contentious conflict among urban social-justice and environmental-justice advocates, for example, has been the competition for scarce land that is potentially available to build schools, affordable housing, urban parks, or community gardens. Can the development of new green spaces be possible given the framework for urban land-use decisions and the enormous social needs (for schools and housing) not otherwise met? The answer may well depend on how these different needs are addressed by the social movements working on their behalf and in relation to each other.[64]

The questions of what constitutes urban nature and how to advocate for it force urban environmentalists to confront the dilemma of the nature/human-activity divide. Bruno Latour has argued that such a divide has led to the construction of three separate domains—facts (the domain of science), power (the domain of politics), and discourse (the domain of language and culture). Since nature is situated within the domain of facts but outside the human domain of politics and power, he warns environmentalists

that the separation between the human and the nonhuman will continually exclude or at best limit how nature (seen as the nonhuman world) is addressed. Thus nature also becomes "victim," a perspective that permeates the thinking of the environmental movement, as Alexander Wilson has pointed out. Nowhere is this more apparent than in an urban context where saving nature had long been assumed by environmentalists to be a lost cause. Even with the environmental-justice movement's embrace of urban greening as an important new dimension of environmental advocacy, the acceptance of the divide undercuts the capacity to rethink how to advocate for—and reinvent and reimagine—nature in the city.[65]

Latour argues that overcoming the divide can be accomplished by creating what he calls "mixtures between two entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture," that are mobilized and assembled into networks that weave the natural and social worlds—humans and nonhumans—into a seamless fabric that may provide the basis for a different kind of advocacy. One way to define nature, Raymond Williams argues in his book *Keywords*, is to reference it as "the whole material world, and therefore to a multiplicity of things and creatures." "Any full history of the uses of nature," Williams further argues, "would be a history of a large part of human thought." Nature, then, is best understood not as a unitary concept (separate from human activity, outside of history or social life) but as multiple reference points—natures rather than nature, hybrids rather than something that is pure and untouched in its "natural" state. Overcoming the divide by establishing new networks and a common language means that to "respect nature," as David Harvey argues, "is to respect ourselves. To engage with and transform nature is to transform ourselves." A common agenda for transformation needs to be located, and as a number of contemporary social movements have begun to suggest, the concepts of livelihood and livability may provide a useful starting point.[66]

Livability references how we affect the material world around us and how it in turn affects our own lives. Livability can be distinguished from the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, which often are used to suggest management strategies that help companies find profitable ways to

reduce pollution but that fail to challenge the structures of power and the dynamic and logic of the existing production system (including the production of urbanized space). A livability agenda has the capacity to seek changes that can transform that production system from its most local level (creating a community garden linked to an affordable housing project) to its most global (creating a social change across borders model of development, as a number of the World Social Forum advocates have begun to explore).

Similarly, the concept of livelihood encompasses an idea of work that is vested with a sense of ownership, is connected to what is produced, and also embodies the idea of justice or "equitable livelihood." Livelihood in an urban context also refers spatially to where we work as well as where we live and play. As Peter Evans has defined it, "Livelihood means jobs close enough to decent housing with wages commensurate with rents and access to services that make for a healthful habitat."[67]

Livelihood and livability represent both an environmental agenda and a social-justice agenda, a politics of nature and an agenda for social transformation. It can be linked to Bruno Latour's notion of "political ecology" (welcoming nonhumans into politics) and Raymond Williams's concept of "the new politics of equitable livelihood." It is also an agenda for urban change, not for bringing nature back into the city but for reinventing nature in the city as a way to better understand and help transform that material world around us.

2

Community in the City

Community is where community happens.

—*Thomas Bender*[1]

Jogging around a Cemetery, Watching the Film *Crash*

Approaching Evergreen Cemetery, at the eastern edge of the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles, visitors are inevitably struck by the contrast between the extensive, open cemetery land and the dense, compact neighborhood that surrounds it. The cemetery is the largest open space in East L.A. A jogging path extends nearly a mile and a half around its perimeter. The path is well lit and has a rubberized cement pavement (made from recycled automobile tires) that covers the large cracks that had made jogging somewhat like running an obstacle course in the past. This cemetery's open space and exterior jogging path provide Los Angeles with a unique type of community-nature link that is steeped in the little-known histories of the neighborhood and the city.

Evergreen Cemetery, established in 1877, is the oldest cemetery in Los Angeles. Over the years, the cemetery has come to reflect the lives of those who lived in the many communities that have surrounded it. Its plots are