Gentrifying the Los Angeles River

BY

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Once marginalized by the city's elite, LA's riverside neighborhoods are now facing revitalization — and displacement.

From its modest start in the Santa Susana Mountains to its end at the Western reach of the San Fernando Valley, the Los Angeles River spans forty-eight miles. The thirty-two miles that cut through the heart of Los Angeles and its surrounding cities — made famous by such movies as *Grease* and *Terminator 2* — resemble a massive war trench made of concrete. In 2007, after decades of lobbying by community groups, environmentalists, and artists, the City of Los Angeles in collaboration with the Army Corps of Engineers approved a $1.3 billion master plan that will reimagine an eleven-mile stretch of the river, transforming it from a gash on the cityscape to a beautified urban sanctuary.

As the city celebrates the start of the project, some of the activists who originally championed the revitalization of the river fear that it has become a Trojan horse for gentrification. Sissy Trinh, the Vietnamese-American founder of the Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA), said that she "recognizes the need for green infrastructure projects like the LA River restoration, but the practical reality is that these types of projects are profit-making opportunities for mega-developers who are creating a speculative economy in our impacted communities."

As a grassroots organization, SEACA's focus is centered around youth-based organizing and policy advocacy in underserved LA neighborhoods such as Chinatown, Lincoln Heights, and Solano Canyon. Most of those community's residents live slightly above or below the poverty line and are majority people of color who also happen to share an uneasy and often antagonistic relationship with the rapidly changing LA River waterfront. Because of the rising rate of homelessness in the communities it serves, SEACA now describes its work "as dealing with the issues of gentrification, displacement, AND homelessness prevention."

There is a certain amount of irony in this story. It was the neglect of the LA River that contributed to these neighborhoods' economic stagnation in the first place; and yet it's the same river that will bring in a flood of economic regeneration that community members fear will end up forcing them out.

It was no accident that many, mostly poor and working-class people of color came to be concentrated so close to the riverfront in the first place. Rents were relatively cheap because city officials and land developers viewed the river as a grim eyesore blemishing an otherwise glitzy city. In 1938, the Army Corps of Engineers began paving over the waterway with concrete in order to prevent the frequent flooding that was plaguing the city and hindering its economic growth. When the project was completed, most of the river was paved over, no longer functioning as a river but rather as a gigantic flood channel.

Over the course of the next few decades, the city neglected to adequately invest in the riverfront. Developers had no desire to build near what was universally viewed as an eyesore, so real-estate values remained stagnant. With the land so cheap, manufacturers found an affordable place to set-up shop. Most of the neighborhoods along the river were zoned exclusively for manufacturing. Large factories and warehouses still dominate the areas along the river. The manufacturing sector provides an important source of income, with living wages for the thousands of working-class and immigrant residents who live and work near the river. In fact, Los Angeles County is the largest manufacturing center in US, employing 510,900 workers, and a substantial portion of this industry is located near the river.

For many, the riverfront has served as an economic refuge for those who otherwise couldn't afford the astronomical cost of living in Los Angeles, one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the world. According to a study by the University of Southern California's Price School of Public Policy, of the one million people living along the river, 52 percent are Latino, a larger share than the overall Latino population of Los Angeles. The median household income of river communities is a mere $45,000 a year, with 18 percent living at or below the poverty line.

Because of the demographics along the river, city officials, as well as developers like Lincoln Property Company and Fifteen Group, have been using the language of ecology, equality, and livability, portraying the river's development as a social-justice cause. Developers are promising to build affordable housing and other supposed concessions in exchange for tax breaks and other economic concessions. Highlighting the unequal disparity of parkland across the city, proponents of redevelopment claim the river will unite the city for the collective good.

"Wherever the river is, it connects all of us," said Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti. "Physically, environmentally, spiritually." But who, exactly, the river development will connect is not entirely clear. For those living on its edges, the river was a symbol of economic divide and social marginalization. For the mayor and the developers who support him, the river is viewed as an engine of prosperity.

For the Few, Not the Many

Hoping the project will cement his legacy, Garcetti argues that the redevelopment will transform the river into an urban oasis accessible to all Angelinos, as well as address the racial and economic disparities surrounding access to parkland.

According to the Price School's research, white LA residents have access to about twelve to fifteen times more parkland per resident than those living in Latino and black communities. "Densely populated neighborhoods in Central Los Angeles have less than one acre of parkland per 1,000 residents" the study found. Predominantly higher-income white communities have "100 acres of parks per 1,000 residents."

Proponents of the revitalized river claim the project will bring much needed parkland right to the doorstep of the underserved. Yet critics warn that a flash flood of displacement should be expected instead.

"The sad irony of projects like the LA River restoration" Sissy Trinh said, "is that they were designed to address climate-change impacts and to make us a more climate-resilient city but the 'unintended consequences' of gentrification and displacement are in fact undermining the stated goal of these projects."

Studies project the LA River's revitalization will spur billions of dollars in riverside development. Land values have already increased 21 percent in anticipation of the project. In Los Angeles's Frogtown neighborhood, land values have more than doubled. Rents have also risen astronomically along other waterfront communities, such as Chinatown, where in at least one building rents have increased by as much as 50 percent. Land speculation and rent increases have lead activists like Sissy Trinh to believe that any environmental benefits gained as a result of the

river project will be inconsequential because the river project will undoubtedly exacerbate LA's already massive homelessness crisis.

"For example" Trich said, "a number of low-income residents that got priced out of their neighborhoods are now setting up encampments or living out of RVs and dumping their raw sewage into the River!"

The project is expected to generate a building boom, subsidized to the tune of $500 million by the city via its nonprofit River LA Corporation, which oversees public-private partnerships surrounding the river.

At least one of the many developers on the corporation's board has already demonstrated a substantial conflict of interest. In 2011, when Morton La Kretz put up $4.75 million for a bridge connecting the Atwater Village neighborhood to Griffith Park on the opposite side of the river, Mayor Garcetti, then a city-council member, praised it as "the kind of public-private partnership we need to continue bringing new life to the river and the neighborhoods around it." City, county and state officials agreed to front the remaining costs of completing the bridge, the price tag of which eventually ballooned to over $16 million. The La Kretz family owns a parcel of land near the bridge that, with Garcetti's backing, it has sought to rezone into a subdivision. Kretz also owns land in Frogtown, a neighborhood that sits directly opposite the river banks.

The original grassroots effort to transform underutilized public space for public good has been co-opted for personal profit by developers like La Kratz. The project's master plan, finalized back in 2007, was conceived with community input, but in 2016 River LA turned the project over to architect Frank Gehry. Known for his gaudy buildings, Gehry has no previous experience in urban design. Yet Garcetti praised his involvement, stating that Gehry would elevate the development so that the "civic elite of LA realizes this is not a hobby of the activists but one of the grand projects of our time."

In the minds of many activists, the mayor's statement cemented the belief that the LA River project is being designed with the covert intention of benefiting the city's moneyed elite at the expense of the working-class communities along the river. Activist lawyer Robert Garcia, executive director of City Project, said in a recent interview in the *LA Times* that the city historically "treated its river as an industrial wasteland" and described the development along the riverfront as a "land grab." Sissy Trinh points out that the neighborhoods along the waterfront are "among the poorest in the city."

Yet the project is moving forward without adequately addressing concerns over the detrimental effects of displacement, and observers worry it will be a feat not so much of urban engineering as of

social engineering.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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