

Shaan Londhe

Professor Jaurretche

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A Timeless Mural: The Great Wall of Los Angeles

I knew everything there was to know about my home, “the valley.” My two hundred sixty square mile paradise--homes, malls, schools and--“Oh, the LA River, a halfpipe with some water in it, maybe a stream.” My opinions about it stemmed from news stories such as, “Bodies Found In LA River”, and its appearance: a dry exterior. Road signs with a graceful, white crane and the words, “Los Angeles River” attempted to mask sheer, concrete plainness. Eighteen years passing over the joke of a river on the bridge of Corbin Avenue prompted me to cast it aside. Scattered graffiti enveloped the walls of the channel. A sea of plastic bottles and trash bags drifted about muddy concrete. Upon my first sight of the channel I looked out the car window in disgust. It was nothing but an open sewer-dump to my eyes.

Looks can be deceiving!

Only a few miles east of the river’s intersection at Corbin Avenue, my friend Alex Pang and I approached a very different sight. On the edge of Los Angeles Valley College, *this* channel carved in the landscape was anything but an eyesore. I was an outsider at first--a blank canvas--eyeing the colorful concrete that would transport us through time. “How could this be the same LA River running through Corbin?” The lack of graffiti along the channel struck me (strange for a large concrete wall in Los Angeles). Grand trees blanketed the fences enclosing the river. Lush grass and bushes accompanied squirrels scurrying about an adjacent

sidewalk--tranquil and welcoming in nature. Folks spent their weekend seemingly undisturbed by the street of rushing cars right next to them, strolling on the walkway and occasionally glancing at the beautiful sight before us: The Great Wall of Los Angeles.

A half-mile long mural spread across this “Great Wall” of the river channel depicted scenes of almost all of California and Los Angeles history in a timeline. Ancient Native American symbols and ideologies caught my eye as we stared down the never-ending channel. In awe of such a meticulous and romantic mural, supposedly the largest in the world, I could only imagine the hundreds of contributors to a project of this magnitude. Names of these individuals were written along the walls--names I had much respect for. In light of this, Pang and I decided to observe every ounce of its half-mile glory, beginning the excursion at the southern end where we greeted a saber-toothed tiger and mammoth trudging through the La Brea Tar Pits. The reign of Chumash Indians and their spirits then followed the onset of Spanish settlement. The oppression of the Chinese later preceded southern migration, Jewish empowerment, and Civil Rights. I relived the story of my city in a long walk, noting the plethora of events central to marginalized communities that settled the region.

Seconds were minutes. The hour we spent gazing felt like three, and our drive back to UCLA was filled with reflection.

Beautification efforts in the city during the late twentieth century spurred city officials to create the Great Wall of Los Angeles. From my observations I sensed how the murals made a dull concrete structure into a destination, giving greater appeal to tourists by detracting from a visually “dead” river. The trees and a long “strip” of park alongside the channel became an outdoor museum for Pang and I. It became clear that the reasons for constructing the mural were

far beyond improving the appearance of a half-mile wall. Its implications on the citizens of Los Angeles continued to be greater than what the masterminds behind the Great Wall could have ever hoped for.

The vivid expressions of historically disadvantaged peoples would allow fellow “Los Angelians” to relate to what their past communities went through. The contributors to the Great Wall, many of whom were extensions of these oppressed families, used the concrete wall as their canvas to express their attitudes about the past and desires for the future.

The mural’s timeline emphasized the city’s drastic evolution. The depictions of suffering minorities were followed by drastic cultural and societal advancements of these groups--in my opinion, a massive success. These interracial harmonies were the focal points of the Great Wall. Not merely a history rooted in hardship, Los Angeles’s past progression is in the process of inspiring another era of positive change. The city today stands as a melting pot that was symbolically portrayed through historical events depicted in the paintings, both oppressive and empowering. I believed this is the primary purpose for the Great Wall’s existence.

Rooted in my respect towards the city’s history was that “unifying” aspect of the Great Wall. I felt it during the visit--an assembling element striving to make all observers feel welcome. I found myself comforted and acknowledged--treated to an educational story in just an hour. Immensely humbled to be a part of a unique past filled with tenacity and development, I felt like a patriot would feel towards their country, towards my city of Los Angeles.

My own city pride allowed me to sense the mural’s innate morality. Noticing the lack of graffiti while on the journey, it became evident that Los Angelians idolize the Great Wall and its

history. I felt comfortable calling the Great Wall of Los Angeles a landmark despite never hearing its name before last month (and its name rightfully comes from another world landmark).

Fascinated by the educational and societal implications of the three thousand foot mural, I noticed how it occupies public consciousness. Bypassers seemingly had an aura of peace, stemming from their respect of the history and connection to their community. As Blake Gumprecht explained throughout his book, *The Los Angeles River*; the river was directly responsible for the upbringing of Los Angeles. It became the unifying feature of city development, just as the Great Wall of Los Angeles unifies each and every person of the local community. Implicit in the mural is a call to action for the public--the continuation of societal advancements that will build upon Los Angeles history. Further progression will inspire new paintings that will never cease to extend the magnificent mural.