

**THE DAY THAT PEOPLE FILED THE FREEWAY:  
RE-ENVISIONING THE ARROYO SECO PARKWAY  
AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT IN LOS ANGELES**

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## **Abstract**

Los Angeles is a city shaped by its freeway system. Superimposed on the physical and social landscape of the city, the freeways have tended to split and destroy the fine grain of residential neighborhoods. The design and implementation of the freeway system exemplifies the dictum of top-down planning, envisioned by transportation engineers and city fathers with little or no input from the affected communities. Emblematic of this treatment of the urban landscape is the “first freeway of the west,” the historic Arroyo Seco Parkway in Los Angeles. Located within the Arroyo Corridor, the freeway includes in addition to the transportation artery, a sub-watershed of the Los Angeles River, which has also been channelized and built upon. The article discusses recent grassroots efforts that offer a ‘counter-strategy’ to the narrative of hegemonic, top-down planning, by allowing participation, input and action from the neighboring communities. The goal is nothing less but to make the freeway a connector rather than a separator of the diverse neighborhoods along its banks and to craft a core strategy for urban environmental renewal in a region long characterized as hostile to environmental goals.

## **Introduction**

It was Saturday, May 29, 2004. The sun was burning the asphalt of the Arroyo Seco Parkway, the major transportation artery of Northeast Los Angeles, which connects the city’s downtown to the suburban center of Pasadena to the north. Cars were zooming their way through the concrete freeway channel. Drivers and passengers enclosed in their metal cocoons were mostly unaware of the neighborhoods on either side of the freeway embankments. Suddenly, flashing red lights and sirens startled the motorists, interrupting the monotony of the freeway landscape. A police chase! As was revealed hours later, the police, in typical Hollywood fashion, were hounding some bank robbers. In the havoc that followed the freeway would be shut down and motorists would be stranded in their cars, helplessly watching the freeway become transformed into a vast parking lot in a matter of minutes.

“Sig-alerts” are unique to Southern California. The term was introduced in the 1940s when the Los Angeles Police Department used to alert a local radio reporter, Lloyd Sigmund, of traffic emergencies on the regions’ freeways. Today, they have become part of an urban routine

for Angelenos, who often find themselves entrapped in their cars because of a sig-alert. But while that day's sig-alert on this stretch of freeway could be characterized as typical, the scene that unfolded was not. A few minutes after the cars were forced to stop to give way to the police investigation that ensued, a mariachi band with guitars and drums suddenly appeared on the freeway pavement. The musicians, who were also trapped in their car, had decided to come out and offer free entertainment to a captive audience. In a matter of minutes magic had overcome the dreary freeway landscape, as hundreds of people were rhythmically swinging and clapping to the tunes of "El Cucaracha." Ice cream and water vendors, who also sensed a captive (and thirsty) audience, trickled down from the neighborhoods bordering the freeway, while some bikers did not miss the opportunity to swing their way through the parked cars, up and down the freeway.

This unplanned incident marked the second time that people rather than cars had gained the center stage on the Arroyo Seco Parkway. Less than a year earlier, on June 15, 2003, more than 3,000 bike riders and several thousand walkers descended on the freeway, as part of an event called *ArroyoFest*. This planned occupation of the freeway was, as its organizers put it, part of a broader agenda for building capacity and connecting the diverse communities along the Arroyo Seco corridor and for rethinking the roles of the oldest freeway in the West and the stream that once upon a time used to cross it (UEPI, 2003). By closing the freeway for four hours, bikers and walkers who rode and strolled ON the freeway and attended a community festival, participated in a "magical moment" for Southern California, as several of those attending characterized it. (UEPI, 2003). ArroyoFest in turn was seen as contributing to the development of the next stage of a complex history that encompassed the evolution of the parkway that became a freeway, the stream that became a concrete channel, and the communities

they intersected. The event was also associated with a number of initiatives focused on transportation, river restoration, and the urban environment designed to promote an agenda of community and environmental renewal.

More than any other city in the world, Los Angeles has come to be symbolized by its freeways. As the most monumental human-made structure in the Los Angeles basin the freeway network has determined a particular spatial order and organization of the city's urban form. Freeways have managed to transport people and goods and link points of origin with points of destination. But when they were superimposed on the smaller, finer grain of residential neighborhoods they tended to split and destroy them.

In outlying city areas, the superimposition of the freeway grid on the landscape has epitomized the complete domination of the "urban" over nature. In a process of urbanization, expansion, and unfettered growth, city fathers have often treated nature as a threatening "other" to be contained, diminished, and built upon (Keil, 1998a). Thus, the city has been associated with the loss of natural habitats and open space and the laying of asphalt and concrete in an ever-expanding process of urbanization and sprawl. Emblematic of that loss has been the channelization of the Los Angeles River and its Arroyo Seco tributary stream that cut through the heart of the urbanized region in a north-south direction.

Two seminal books about Los Angeles, Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* (1990) and Roger Keil's *Los Angeles: Globalization, Urbanization, and Social Struggles* (1998b), eloquently detail the often hegemonic narrative that has sought to subdue nature but also define the political and physical landscape of the city. The municipal government and private sector have most often exercised a "top-down" approach to city development that has not left much room for community input. The superimposition of the freeway network over the city neighborhoods and

the channelization of the Los Angeles River represent expressions of this hegemonic narrative. But Keil also refers to an alternative emerging narrative, a civil society coalition of grassroots groups (environmentalists, community and political activists, churches, and labor unions) which sometimes fight for “counterstrategies” to urban development.

The essay that follows presents such a “counterstrategy” which suggests alternative and “bottom-up” ways of revitalizing elements of the built environment. The article starts with the evolution and transformation of the region’s oldest freeway, and proceeds to detail grassroots efforts to re-envision it, not as a separator or destroyer of neighborhoods, but as a connector that stitches neighborhoods together and builds community. It also looks at efforts to re-envision the Arroyo Seco stream and Los Angeles River as a core strategy for urban environmental renewal in a region long characterized as hostile to environmental goals (Davis, 1996; Keil, 1998b).

### **The Trailway that Became a Parkway**

The Arroyo Seco Parkway traverses an area that has a special place in Southern California’s cultural, environmental, and transportation history. In the early 1900s, the Arroyo’s sycamore-shaded canyon was at the center of the arts and crafts movement in California and attracted a renowned group of writers and artists who played a central role in crafting an image of Southern California as a place of renewal and promise, an image that drew thousands to the Southland and reshaped the region. The arts and crafts movement thrived in part because of its embrace of the natural landscape of the Arroyo.

The sense of place of the Arroyo landscape had also been associated with the notion of an Arroyo transportation corridor following the path of a stream bed. A sandy trailway connecting the villages of Tongva Indians, the Arroyo had been recognized by the first Spanish settlers as the most direct route from the administrative center of the Los Angeles pueblo to the most

important church in the region, Mission San Gabriel (Henstell, 1985). A logical and direct pedestrian route, this ancient roadway was to be adapted to speedier means of transportation, first of horse wagons, then bicycles, and finally automobiles.

A route connecting downtown Los Angeles to Pasadena, and even further—linking the mountains to the sea-- had been talked about since 1895 (Morrison, 1990). In 1900, the first vehicle traffic plan catering to the “mechanical marvel of the day: the bicycle” opened through the Arroyo (Henstell, 1985). Then Pasadena Mayor, Horace Dobbins, began work on “the Cycleway,” which would have linked Pasadena with Los Angeles. This bicycle path on an elevated, multi-lane, wooden structure provided grade separation and is now regarded as a precursor of the parkway. But the path was only partly constructed and never fully completed because of lack of funds.

Visions of a scenic transportation corridor reappeared throughout the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Discussion and debate about a roadway continued well into the 1910s and 1920s, influenced by the national impetus for the building of parkways. These discussions often crystallized into specific proposals and plans. A 1911 drawing by Laurie Davidson Cox depicts the existing Los Angeles parks linked by a series of new or enhanced roadways. One of these roadways would connect the northeast corner of Elysian Park to the southeast reach of an Arroyo Seco Parkway (Hise and Deverell, 2000). The 1913 proposal for an Arroyo Seco Parkway by the Los Angeles Parks Commission also envisioned a metropolitan parkway through the cities of Los Angeles, South Pasadena, and Pasadena to the mountains of the National Forest Reserve (Los Angeles Parks Commission, 1913). The 1924 *Major Street Traffic Plan for Los Angeles* by Olmsted, Bartholomew, and Charles H. Cheney proposed the first grade-separated parkway

following the Arroyo Seco from Pasadena to Los Angeles, and was modeled after the suburban parkways of New York (Wachs, 1996).

In 1930, a report, entitled “Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region,” was presented to the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, which had commissioned the study by noted planners Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Harlan Bartholomew. The Olmsted/Bartholomew Plan, as it came to be known, provided a comprehensive overview of the loss of open space and the need for more park development and transportation planning that would enhance rather than undermine the creation of new park lands and open space corridors in the region. The Arroyo figured prominently in the Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan since the Pasadena-Los Angeles transportation corridor that paralleled the course of the Arroyo Seco stream, and adjacent parkland provided a significant opportunity for the elaboration and implementation of the approach advocated by the report. A dedicated parkway that ran parallel to the stream (which in turn fed into the Los Angeles River) was conceived as an extension of the strategy of park and open space development. The Olmsted-Bartholomew document elaborated on the parkway concept that had emerged in several Eastern cities during the 1920s as well as concepts about watershed planning that encouraged the use of parks and open space adjacent to urban streams and rivers as a type of urban flood management strategy. Through a series of detailed planning ideas and recommendations, the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan provided a radical interpretation of the appropriate next stage in Los Angeles’ land use development which had up to then resembled more of a chaotic, market-driven series of real estate speculations. (Hise and Deverell, 2000). However, this Plan, made public just as the Depression was gaining momentum, was never embraced as such, due partly to Depression-era funding constraints as well as Los Angeles’ continuing love affair with unregulated real estate development. While parts of the

Plan, such as the development of a regional system of dedicated roadways, were implemented, the result was L.A.'s vast freeway grid, an outcome that was dramatically different than the Olmsted-Batholomew vision of parkways enhancing rather than bulldozing through the surrounding communities and natural landscape.

The Arroyo Seco Parkway that started operating in 1940 was a product of an era that gave prominence to speed and efficiency. The 8.2-mile parkway was the first grade-separated, limited access, high-speed divided road in the west, and combined the best traditions of parkway design with engineering inventiveness and technological innovation. Designed as a roadway where the ingress and egress from abutting property was prohibited, where all crossings were separated, and all left turns were prevented, the parkway allowed for uninterrupted movement of vehicles and transportation efficiency.

Consistent with the dictums of early parkway planning the Arroyo Seco Parkway at first offered driving pleasure to motorists by exposing them to the scenic beauty of the surrounding landscape. Existing parklands were enhanced by the planting of approximately 4,000 plants of various varieties, which were selected and placed so that "a brilliant showing of color would be maintained throughout the year" (Cortelyou, 1940:9) (Figure 1). A major program of roadside beautification eliminated billboards, advertisements and other objects of commercial blight. To enhance the pleasure of the ride engineers adjusted the road's contours to fit the landscape, installed "rustic" rails on rubble parapet walls and wooden railings along on- and off-ramps (Historic American Engineering Record, 1999).

### **From Parkway to Freeway**

As times were changing fast, the goal of efficiency quickly overshadowed that of aesthetic delight. In the 1950s the nation witnessed the first decade of an era dominated by



traffic engineering. The passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1956 led to the building of 43,000 miles of utilitarian roads, including 2,175 miles within city limits (Seely, 1987). Multi-lane freeway systems that could move people and goods at higher speeds were superimposed over the land with little or no attention to aesthetics, scenic pleasure, community values, or environmental impacts. Decked overpasses supplanted the decorated stone bridges. Wooden rails and sculpted roadside surfaces gave way to concrete sound walls, and the gently winding roadway lanes were replaced by flat and curveless ribbons (Leccesse, 1989). Parkways, considered products of a bygone era, quickly lost favor among traffic engineers. The adjustment of parkways to the freeway era has been problematic at best, as they were designed for different capacities (much less cars), different speeds (slower vehicles), and different objectives (visual connection and recreational driving).

Already by 1940, at the time of its dedication, the Arroyo Seco Parkway, with its crucial goal of aesthetic appeal and connection to a natural landscape, began to be redefined by the new language of freeway identified as “route” rather than “connection to place.” This included its more concentrated focus on speed, traffic volume, uninterrupted travel, and efficiency. The program prepared for the dedication ceremony emphasized that the parkway would become “the first completed unit of the proposed system of modern express highways which is absolutely essential in this, the fastest growing and most congested metropolitan area in the West, to provide for the safe and expeditious handling of traffic” (Cortelyou, 1940:9).

The shift in transportation planning was particularly pronounced. Already by 1940, proponents of an auto-centric transportation system would declare that “in highways lies a new national frontier for the pessimist who thinks frontiers have disappeared.” (Rose, 1979:1) The change to the freeway system that emerged during the 1950s was partly a change that elevated the

automobile as the dominant mode of transportation and therefore identified the need for a comprehensive and interconnected system of freeways.

This shift had two major consequences. On the one hand, it thoroughly undermined proposals made by various public transportation advocates during the 1920s and 1930s to establish a linked transportation system that included parkways, rail (including a rail system along the median strip of a parkway), bus, and even bike commute. As the parkway gave way to the freeway and the stream and river it fed into became channelized, the goals of the “pleasure drive” and connection to place became even more problematic. New freeways were straightened in order to maximize speed and efficiency. Their locations were determined in relation to an interconnected grid system that paralleled the old interurban routes and the emerging real estate speculation and growth patterns of the region while paying little if any attention to the surrounding landscape and even existing built environments.

### **The Stream and the River that Became Concrete Flood Channels**

The Arroyo’s environmental history can be traced in the transformation of the stream that runs through it. The Arroyo Seco stream, a 46.6 square mile watershed tributary to the Los Angeles River, has long been considered one of Southern California’s greatest natural resources. From high in the San Gabriel Mountains north of Pasadena, the Arroyo Seco’s stream still flows freely until it leaves the mountains and enters the urbanized segment of the Arroyo. In this urban stretch the stream meets the freeway for the last six miles of its journey before emptying onto the broad concrete plain of the Los Angeles River, next to the rail yards and overpasses just north of downtown Los Angeles.

Prior to its urban stretch becoming channelized in the late 1930s, the Arroyo’s waters flowed with trout. Willow and sycamore trees grew along its banks providing habitat for aquatic life and birds. Earlier generations of Tongva Indians and European settlers were inspired by its

beauty, and lived partly off its bounty. Raging floods occurred but they tended to be absorbed by the agricultural lands or open spaces that abutted the stream.

Arroyo Seco means “dry gulch,” but the stream could swell tremendously during winter storms. The periodic flooding of the Arroyo stream and the Los Angeles River became a significant policy concern as more of the adjacent agricultural and undeveloped lands had turned into residential and commercial development and were subject to devastating impacts from the floods. In 1930 the aforementioned Olmsted-Batholomew Plan proposed to respond to the threat by building parkways and parklands as a flood management tool for the Arroyo Seco stream and L.A. River watershed. But by the 1940s, as parkways became freeways, the idea of parklands absorbing flood waters gave way to a very different notion of how to tame the flood waters that would periodically come rushing down the mountains. The region’s leaders and federal engineers decided to channelize the river by lining with concrete the stream bed of the lower Arroyo and ultimately channelizing as much of the 51-mile river as possible, except in three sections of the river where the underground water table was too high.

Over the next several decades, the Arroyo Seco stream, particularly in its urban stretch, was transformed into a straightened concrete funnel. Tributaries were encapsulated or diverted into buried pipes. These changes, combined with the dams of the Upper Arroyo, in turn altered the hydrology and ecosystems of the Arroyo watershed. Like the Los Angeles River itself, the stream became a mass of concrete jutting. Along with the freeway that had been built above the stream through diverse neighborhoods and park lands, Arroyo residents began to lose the connection to a sense of place that the Arroyo had once provided. And the development of a flood control strategy that poured concrete into stream beds created a visual eyesore. The channel that had once been a stream became a landscape defined more by danger and violence

for adjacent neighborhoods whose residents were taught to keep away rather than appreciate what had previously been part of and helped define their communities. Similarly, the channelization of the L.A. River created a type of barbed-wire danger zone through many of the working class and low-income neighborhoods it crossed, transforming the river itself into a type of “water freeway,” as its engineer managers depicted it. (Henning, 1958)

What had happened? How had the vision of greenbelts, inventive flood management strategies, and pleasure drives become transformed into ugly concrete channels and high-speed freeways; changes that would ultimately define contemporary transportation design and planning and flood control approaches? These approaches in turn would contribute to the sprawling land use patterns, including the continuing residential and commercial development along the flood plains of the Arroyo Seco and L.A. River, and the creation of what came to be known as the “automobile suburbs.”

### **Diverse -- and Disconnected Communities**

The Arroyo Seco corridor, following the paths of the freeway and the concrete channel, is bordered by a wide range of diverse communities. These include the Upper Arroyo cities of Pasadena, South Pasadena, La Cañada-Flintridge, and the unincorporated area of Altadena. These in turn link to the communities of the Lower Arroyo which consists of the neighborhoods of Northeast Los Angeles, including all or parts of the communities of Chinatown, Cypress Park, Eagle Rock, Garvanza, Glassell Park, Hermon, Highland Park, Lincoln Heights, Montecito Heights, Monterey Hills, and Mount Washington.

Today, Arroyo residents mirror the diversity of the Southern California region. According to the 2000 Census, of the nearly six hundred eighty thousand residents of Arroyo communities, about 47 percent are Latino, 27 percent are White, 15.5 percent are Asian, and 7

percent are African American. The Arroyo continues to welcome new arrivals, as it has for more than a century, with forty two percent of Arroyo residents born outside of the United States. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001a) Arroyo Seco communities are also economically diverse. Per-capita income across the entire Arroyo was \$21,268 in 1999 – a few hundred dollars more than the average income of Los Angeles County as a whole. Income varies within the Arroyo, ranging from less than \$10,000 in the least affluent zip code to more than \$60,000 in the wealthiest. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001b)

Despite its diverse communities and rich history, the area has suffered from lack of political clout and limited attention by policymakers, internal bickering between cities and between neighborhoods, and class and cultural tensions that have mirrored broader tensions within Southern California as a whole. Nevertheless, Arroyo communities have generated an active civic life and spawned a number of political and environmental coalitions and civic movements that have focused on opportunities for community and cultural renewal.

For these movements, the freeway and the concrete channel came to symbolize the myriad of problems facing the corridor and the region as a whole. For one, the fabled notion of freeway efficiency has largely disappeared from the public discourse. While the Arroyo Seco Parkway had been viewed in the 1940s as a model for roadway design, sixty years later it has become plagued by a number of problems, often cursed by those who have to enter its dangerous ramps or sit through its congested traffic. Originally built to carry 27,000 automobiles per day at 45mph, the parkway carries today an average daily traffic of over 130,000 cars (at its southern end). Congestion in fact can be found on the parkway during many times of the day and evening. Originally built for a leisurely drive, the parkway has only three rather narrow lanes on each bound. Given the greater volume of vehicles, higher speeds, and high volume of accidents that

can trigger horrendous traffic jams and sig-alerts, bottlenecks are a daily occurrence for what has become the main thoroughfare connecting Pasadena to downtown Los Angeles. (Loukaitou-Sideris and Gottlieb, 2003)

### **Making Change Happen**

*River and Stream Restoration.* Despite the enormity of the problems associated with the dominance of the freeway system and the flood control approach towards urban river and stream management, efforts to contest these systems began to take root in the 1980s and 1990s. From the 1940s when it began to be channelized up through the 1980s, the Los Angeles River was considered a bleak, hostile place, a concrete channel fenced off from its surrounding neighborhoods. It was a river that had been straightened and (presumably) tamed. But led by a poet and performance artist named Lewis MacAdams, a new organization, Friends of the L.A. River (FoLAR) was created whose initial goal was simply to insist that the L.A. River was indeed a river. MacAdams attracted like-minded artists, planners, architects, designers, and neighborhood activists to his championing of his “40 year art project” to bring the river back to life and re-establish a connection to the river as a place to be valued (Gottlieb, 2001).

By the late 1990s, as this effort to reclaim and re-envision the L.A. River spread and made cause with other urban river renewal movements around the country, MacAdams and his allies extended their river advocacy to address issues of community change. A number of new players became involved in river advocacy who were as much if not more interested in neighborhood than river revitalization. Along with a host of Asian and Latino neighborhood advocates, as well as environmental groups and public interest lawyers, these community/environmental advocates launched a battle against a powerful developer over a plan to develop warehouses and light industry in a large undeveloped lot adjacent to the river at the

southern edge of the Arroyo Seco corridor. The site, known as the Cornfield over its earlier agricultural history, bridged Chinatown with other Latino neighborhoods just north and east of downtown Los Angeles. Employing traditional as well as unconventional strategies, the Cornfield fight became emblematic of the power of a new community-environmental alliance in Los Angeles and its desire for an urban environmental renewal. (Kibel, 2004). The alliance claimed success when the developer eventually sold the site to the State of California for the establishment of a new park

Movements to restore the Arroyo Seco, drawing on the rich cultural and natural history of the Arroyo and special place of the Arroyo Seco stream, also began to meet during the 1990s to advocate for a program of stream restoration. In the late 1990s, two local groups, Northeast Trees and the Arroyo Seco Foundation, undertook a watershed analysis of the Arroyo Seco, and hosted community meetings to discuss possible stream restoration and related urban greening strategies of the Arroyo. Prompted by the Arroyo Seco's unique blend of natural and urban characteristics and the advocacy of the environmental and community groups, the California Resources Agency declared the Arroyo in 2001 one of ten model watersheds for the state of California (California Resources Agency, 2001). Restoration strategies remained difficult and complex undertakings, however, given long standing engineering biases among key agencies involved and resistance from private groups who felt that restoration impacted their plans for development. Nevertheless, significant momentum had developed in the Arroyo Seco to identify a strategy for renewal and recapture some of the landscape and cultural values that had once made the Arroyo one of the most attractive locations in the Western U.S.

*Re-envisioning the Arroyo Seco Corridor.* Parallel to the previously outlined endeavors to reclaim the stream and river as natural elements in the city, an effort to reinstate

some of the original values of the parkway was also being formed. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the drive along the Arroyo Seco Parkway had become as unsafe and unpleasurable in bumper-to-bumper congested traffic as any freeway in southern California or for that matter in any urban region, a far cry from the pleasure ride it was originally designed for. As a consequence, a number of community residents began to pressure local elected officials, the California Department of Transportation, and other policymakers, to explore different transportation strategies, including ways to recapture the parkway vision. Shortly before the ArroyoFest event took place in 2003, some of this momentum for change began to translate into specific policy innovations. With respect to the freeway, community groups succeeded in getting it designated as an American Civil Engineering Landmark, with the federal government also providing it with National Scenic Byway status. Traffic calming concepts, including the idea of reducing speed limits and restructuring lane approaches to exits and entrance-ways, started being explored. (Loukaitou-Sideris and Gottlieb, 2003).

The introduction of alternative transportation strategies that are not auto-centric and can relieve the traffic congestion on the parkway took effect with the inauguration of the Gold Line in July 2003, a light rail line paralleling the Arroyo Seco Parkway. At the same time, Los Angeles County planners are exploring the possibility of a bikeway system paralleling the channel.

The momentum for change around transportation paralleled and in a number of respects intersected with efforts towards stream and River renewal. Similar to the dialogue with the transportation engineers, watershed planning and stream restoration advocates were also able to convince the Army Corps of Engineers to explore alternative flood management strategies above and beyond their traditional “pour the concrete” approaches. These include strategies for



controlling floods that work more closely with the Arroyo's natural flow. Water could be retained where it fell on the ground, the advocates argued, by providing pervious surfaces that allowed the water to percolate into the ground, rather than running off into the channels or diverting it at points along the stream into constructed wetlands and retention areas. Although removing concrete would not be practical in all spots along the Arroyo, especially where there are structures close to the stream, some areas could be naturalized, helping the Arroyo experience at least a partial rebirth as a more natural canyon and stream. (Northeast Trees and Arroyo Seco Foundation, 2002)

The renewed attention to transportation and watershed issues complemented a rebirth of community activism about social, cultural, and economic issues throughout the Arroyo corridor. New affordable housing groups, community garden advocates, community health organizations, and innovative job training programs provided a new type of civic life to the corridor as well. (UEPI, 2003)

Each of these forms of activism – transportation, watershed, and community development – became part of the message associated with the ArroyoFest event introduced at the beginning of this article. ArroyoFest heightened this notion of re-envisioning the Arroyo Seco and reestablishing a sense of place (Figure 2). As an ArroyoFest participant wrote: *“ArroyoFest went beyond our expectations about creating a linear temporary plaza where the community could come together. It struck a chord in L.A. where people from all walks of life were able to experience a peaceful and silent freeway. Elderly women with parasols, Latino families, hipsters, and just regular folks were there. ArroyoFest suggested that even a car-oriented city like L.A. can change its ideas about freeways”* (James Rojas, Latino Urban Forum, email correspondence, June 16, 2003) (Figure 3).

Both the bike riders, walk participants, and residents adjacent to the freeway also noted how uniquely silent it was that morning and how much appreciation and connection to the green space and natural surroundings of the Arroyo was possible (Figure 4). One participant noted that while he knew that parks lined the Parkway, “seeing and experiencing them as I went by was magical. I could feel the cool air coming out of the tree-covered parks. I always knew the Parkway was built to be beautiful, but seeing it at the appropriate speed clarified my vision.” One of the speakers at the Community Festival who lived close to the freeway in Highland Park spoke of how disorienting – and liberating – it was to “open my window in the morning and hear birds and the wind and breathe the air in a way I had never experienced before.” (UEPI, 2003:9)

Several of the events that took place that day separate from the walk and bike ride emphasized a connection to the Arroyo and the need to redefine and recapture “nature in the City.” One tour took participants to the nearby Debs Park where the Audubon Society has established its first major inner city park and nature education program. During this event, several participants (including those who lived nearby) exclaimed that they had not previously been aware of the park and the opportunities for “nature exploration” associated with it. One of the local leaders of Environmental Defense, a major national environmental organization, participated in one of the walks with several friends, including the 12-year old daughter of a family that lived in a nearby neighborhood. “There was a quite extraordinary moment that symbolized to me the power of ArroyoFest,” the environmental leader told ArroyoFest organizers. “My friend’s daughter was walking with us and at one point let out a shriek. ‘That’s a passion flower,’ she cried out, pointing to a delicate flower growing along the edge of the freeway. ‘I know it, because I studied it, but I never thought I’d actually see one!’” (UEPI, 2003)

## **Conclusion**

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In an early essay Michael Walzer (1986:470) detailing the “pleasures and costs of urbanity” described two kinds of spaces: *single-minded spaces*, designed by planners, engineers, or entrepreneurs with one thing in mind, and used by similarly single-minded citizens, and *open-minded spaces*, designed for a variety of uses by citizens who do different things and are even prepared to tolerate, even take an interest in things they do not do. The re-envisioning of the Arroyo Seco Parkway by community groups, environmental activists, transportation planners, and academics intends nothing less but to convert the Arroyo-Seco Parkway from a single-minded space which is devoted only to automobile traffic and cuts off and separates adjacent neighborhoods to an open-minded space which views the corridor as embedded in its surrounding environmental, social, and cultural context.

ArroyoFest and the different initiatives that seek to re-envision the Arroyo Seco Parkway are reflections of what Roger Keil (1998a) calls “popular civility”-- a counterstrategy that unites different grassroots groups to explore alternatives to the dominant transportation and flood control systems of the city.. These initiatives provide an opportunity for people from across the area to show their support for more parks, alternative transportation systems, healthy urban streams and rivers, a greater appreciation of local history and diverse neighborhoods working together for a better quality of life. ArroyoFest, in particular, struck a cultural chord in freeway-centric Southern California in its argument that other, more community-centered systems and policies could conceivably be within reach. Perhaps most impressively, ArroyoFest provided a connection to a rich but often neglected history of landscapes and communities that had once provided a special connection to place within the rapidly changing Southern California urban environment, but whose voices had been effectively silenced by the hegemonic conception of projects that defined the form of the city.

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Figure 1: Postcard of the Arroyo Seco Parkway in 1942  
Source/Credit: Arroyo Seco Foundation





Figure 2: Bikers riding on the parkway during ArroyoFest  
Source/Credit: Tony Lin



Figure 3: A young biker at ArroyoFest  
Source/Credit: Teresa Ojeda



Figure 4: Activities at ArroyoFest  
Source/Credit: Joan Dooley