



Unique identifier

Rediscovering the LA River

Lewis MacAdams, Friends Of The LA River

At first I thought that my job was just simply to point out that the river could be more beautiful, that the river could be restored, and then after a while I began to realise that the first thing I had to do was to convince people that there actually was a Los Angeles River.

Voice Over

Barely a trickle for most of the year, it still wasn't trusted, and it was illegal to get too close. But in 1985 Lewis MacAdams, with two other friends, cut their way through a chain link fence and made their way to a section of the river known as the Confluence.

Lewis McAdams, Friends Of The LA River

And when we got to the Confluence, the Confluence itself is like a tunnel, and people were living in cars in this tunnel, it was just a scene of human hell.

Voice Over

It was near this very spot that Los Angeles was founded in 1781. The new settlement owed its existence to a river which was considered an essential friend, and at the time this neighbourhood was described as 'paradise on earth'.

Lewis McAdams, Friends Of The LA River

The immense sadness of it really, you know, this immense concrete river, this river that was completely encased, you know we said to the river, we asked the river if we could speak for it in the human realm, and we didn't hear the river say no, so Friends Of The Los Angeles River began.

Voice Over

Rather than chase after the murder suspect, for the past fifteen years the Friends of the Los Angeles River have been chasing virtual Realty pipe dreams of bringing a dead river back to life. They want to take control of a band of land along the LA River front and transform it into a place of bypaths and sports fields, natural habitat and added flood protection. The river has become a barrier between East and West LA. River activists want to transform it into a green belt which reconnects the many socially diverse and politically fragmented communities along its path. They want to see the river and park staff communities along its fifty mile length get some environmental justice. A lot of people down there think they're out of their minds.

Mike Davis, Writer

A larger movement in Southern California, amongst most local politicians, homeowners' associations and societies is to dramatically reduce democratic public space, not to create more.

Voice Over

Getting the locals to believe that a dead river can be brought back to life, although there is hope for more open green space in central LA, is next to impossible. In the popular imagination the LA River is a place of death and destruction, and high speed car chases, courtesy of Hollywood.

Clip

'Grease' Paramount Pictures 1978

Voice Over

The movie 'Grease' may have inspired a local politician to suggest turning the LA River into a part-time freeway.

Clip

'Terminator 2'

Voice Over

In 'Terminator 2' a running battle to decide the fate of the world begins on the LA River.

Clip

'Terminator 2'

Voice Over

But in spite of all the cement and the bad PR, the LA River isn't as dead as many people think it is.

Mike Davis, Writer

I've actually been amazed at how still over the years that the general population has almost no awareness of the river at all, that we have to overcome the officials' attitude that this is a flood control channel; its sole purpose is to convey floodwaters to the ocean.

Voice Over

Out of ten million people in LA Dennis Schure is one of the only people to ever go canoeing on the LA River.

Dennis Schure, LA Resident

Unless they're able to see these rare spots that resemble an actual river they don't fully appreciate the fact that we have a river in Los Angeles.

Voice Over

You only have to travel a few miles upstream to encounter an LA River which, left to its own devices, is showing signs of life.

Dennis Schure, LA Resident

The engineers actually installed this channel, it was straight as an arrow and devoid of vegetation until the subsequent rains came and flushed in organic material and there was enough soil here in the natural bottom areas to start being re-vegetated and start to resemble the original streambed.

Voice Over

A semi-desert climate means that the river is dry for most of the year.

Dennis Schure, LA Resident

During the winter when our heavy rains come through here the water level rises dramatically in here.

Voice Over

In spite of the remaining hazard of winter storms river activists want to see more space in and near the river open for safe, seasonal use.

Patt Morrison, LA Times

Los Angeles itself is one of the biggest park-poor cities in the United States, and yet here in the bed of the river fenced off, locked up, you can be cited for trespassing if you're in there, is more acreage than there is in all of Central Park, and it really is an insult to the people who live close to the river, that here is the space that cannot, even a few months out of the year, be used.