



Unique identifier

Bringing the LA River to Life

Clip

Was it the politicians who killed the river? Would killing a river be good for the economy? Paying an army of unemployed to do the dirty work might help the country snap out of The Depression.

Robert Garcia, Center for Law in the Public Interest

Right over there is East LA, the Filipino community of East LA.

Voice Over

Robert Garcia is a former Federal Prosecutor from New York City. He offered legal firepower for a park in the Cornfield.

Robert Garcia, Center for Law in the Public Interest

To the south of the Cornfield, about a mile or two away, is the African-American community of South Central Los Angeles and Watts. The fact that this was a disproportionately Latino, disproportionately Chinese community, that's why the city and Majestic felt they could get away with putting warehouses here, forty acres of warehouses in the last vast open space in LA, without even a full environmental impact report, or an environmental impact statement.

Lewis MacAdams, Friends Of The LA River

Known to everybody as the Cornfields until we said we're going to start calling this the Chinatown yards, so that people would know where it was, and so people in Chinatown would begin to identify with it.

Chi Mui, Chinatown Yard Alliance

Gourmet Carousel was our meeting place. The Chinatown Yard Alliance met there for over two years to strategise, to discuss how to proceed with our opposition to Majestic Realty.

Voice Over

Over dim sum the Chinatown Yard Alliance was born. They were prepared to sue City Hall, demanding a full environmental impact report for the proposed development. They would lobby Washington to block federal subsidies earmarked for Majestic for Brownfield site clean-up. But at the heart of their legal strategy was to make a case for environmental justice.

Robert Garcia, Center for Law in the Public Interest

In Central Los Angeles there is one athletic field soccer field for every fifty thousand children. That is why parks in Los Angeles are not just an environmental issue, but also an environmental justice, social justice issue.

Voice Over

Using federal civil rights laws that had successfully blocked the construction of waste treatment plants in other poor communities, the Chinatown Yard Alliance would prepare a lawsuit against Majestic.

John Semcken, Majestic Realty

Theirs was what I would call a scorched earth, you know, strategy; it was all or nothing. They didn't want a small piece near the river for a park, which we were planning and willing to do, they wanted to get all of it or none of it.

Voice Over

As the Cornfield coalition grew, local businesses and birdwatchers, teachers and tenants' associations, soccer clubs and social workers, even the Catholic Church, would support a park in the former rail yard. And then a chance encounter between a local archaeologist and some buried history at the Cornfield would strengthen the case for a park.

Robert Garcia, Center for Law in the Public Interest

This is La Zanja Madre, which means the mother ditch or mother canal in Spanish. La Zanja Madre brought the water from the Los Angeles River which is about a ten minute walk across the Cornfield in that direction, brought the water from the Los Angeles River to La Plaza de la Los Angeles, the Plaza of Los Angeles, the original birthplace of the city of LA in the 1700's when the Spaniards were here. So this was the lifeblood for the city of LA, connecting the river to the city.

Voice Over

The timely discovery of the Zanja Madre, or mother ditch, could help establish the Cornfield as a site of important cultural heritage. That could mean excavation, preservation and a big setback for Majestic.

John Semcken, Majestic Realty

The legal entitlement morass that an individual has to go through to get a project approved, and then to get on the public, you know, to fight all of the public criticism and with the paper, you know, being, you know, to assist in a very liberal way, to defend the, you know, the lowest of the interests, you know, as if they were equal with everyone else's.

Patt Morrison, LA Times

To come across a fairly tightly-knit coalition, for example the one that confronted development in the Cornfields, is a little startling for them because they begin to see that the politicians need to listen not only to people who contribute to their campaigns, but to the constituents whose votes put them in office.

Voice Over

After months of lobbying, the Chinatown Yard Alliance convinced the Federal Agency in charge of Urban Development to block subsidies to Majestic. The Head of the Agency is Andrew Cuomo.

Robert Garcia, Center for Law in the Public Interest

Secretary Cuomo issued a decision that he would not fund, the Federal Government would not fund the warehouses here unless there was a full environmental impact statement that considered the park alternative, and considered the impact on communities of colour.

Voice Over

Majestic was on the ropes.

Lewis MacAdams, Friends of the LA River

Prop. 12 came along just at the right time for this project.

Voice Over Graphics

Propositions 12 and 13, two initiatives designed to work together to protect California's water supply.

Graphics

Paid for by Californians for safe neighbourhood parks and clean water.

Voice Over Graphics

Proposition 12 was one of the state-wide bomb measures that had been brewing for many months. It would require voter approval but if passed, would authorise a record two billion dollars to protect water resources, and up to a hundred million for the purchase of land along the LA River for the creation of urban parks. It could be a dream comes true for river activists,

and a way out for Majestic and developers at Taylor Yard who faced the possibility of years in court. Proposition 12 was eventually approved.

Graphics

Proposition 12 protects the coast and land around lakes, river and streams

Proposition 13 protects drinking water and repairs aging pipes

Propositions 12 & 13 have safeguards to prevent waste

Propositions 12 & 13 will have annual independent audits

John Semcken, Majestic Realty

When I can look at all the cards stacked against me, if I want to win, just to win, that's one thing, if I want to be doing business in this city ever again, you know, I needed to make the decision, and so when we made the decision to allow them to buy the property from us for their use, you know, that was a business decision.

Voice Over

In the end Majestic became thirty million dollars richer, and land along the river, which once belonged to the railroads, has been given the best chance ever of becoming river habitat and open green space again.

Clip:

Whoever it was that tried to kill the river, it's a river that refuses to say die.

Voice-over

The engineers are beginning to realise that cement is not the answer to everything. Developers don't always get their way in LA. Politicians are now jumping on the bandwagon of river revitalisation, but will the river ever be a real river?

Patt Morrison, LA Times

Everyone who cares about the Los Angeles River has a definition of when the restoration of the river will have succeeded. Some people say it's when there are Steelhead Trout in the river again. My vision for success of the Los Angeles River is that even though some of the banks may be paved, you look at the Seine in Paris – its banks are paved in part, (over clip from *Charade*, Universal 1933) and it didn't keep Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn from walking romantically along the banks of the river, so when we can film romance movies along the banks of the river, not just chase scenes, when we have our stars walking arm-in-arm and kissing under the moon on the banks of the Los Angeles River, we will have succeeded in bringing that river back.

Clip: *Charade*.