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CULTURAL REVOLUTION

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Water flows out of the central eight-foot circular disk in the plaza at the uppermost corner of the site. The plaza is paved with random flagstone and furnished with two, poured-in-place concrete seat walls. Planting includes indigenous trees, ornamental grasses, lavender, and California poppies.

River Garden Park

Calvin R. Abe Associates' Microcosm of the L.A. River

WITH ARCHED COLONNADES, CLOISTERED courtyards and lush gardens, Lawry's California Center resembled a Spanish-style estate rather than a typical corporate headquarters and manufacturing facility. According to Kathleen Bullard, director of the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens, Lawry's corporate restructuring in 1992 resulted in the abandonment of the cultural landmark and the loss of 600 jobs.

After seven years, the development of a retail facility threatened the gardens and courtyards. "The community was up in arms," said Bullard. "Home Depot

was going to bulldoze the site, and the community did not want to see it destroyed." An innovative solution was found after the community spoke to its representatives, and subsequently, the property was subdivided. The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMCC) purchased the part of the site that contained the smaller buildings and gardens. Their funding stipulated that the land become the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens, and the old corporate buildings were sold to Home Depot as a retail facility to recapture jobs that

had been lost. Today, the SMCC and other non-profit environmental and conservation organizations are housed on the site, as well as the Community Technology and Education Center, an organization that offers low-cost, short-term training courses.

In 1999, the SMCC asked the Los Angeles chapter of the ASLA to conduct a pro bono, community design charrette to plan the River Garden Center. Fortunately, the local organization was looking for a community project to design for display at the ASLA's national conven-



A visual metaphor for the river, the 3-tiered terrace is littered with successively smaller stones and grasses, reinforcing the transition from mountains to floodplain.

tion in Boston as part of an exhibit titled, 100 Years—100 Parks. The concept arrived at during the design workshop included an open space park on the northwest corner of the property, celebrating and interpreting the Los Angeles River in a natural manner.

Calvin R. Abe & Associates was selected by the SMCC to design the River Garden Park in June 2000. Abe, known for creating unusual and artful designs, visited Spritzer Falls, the source of the Los Angeles River, for inspiration. According to Abe, "I wanted to show what the river is about now. People forget that it's a natural system. The water starts out in a beautiful canyon filled with alders, oaks and sycamores;

only in the valley does it become an urban channel." Abe's design is symbolic; it captures the essence of the river's progress, and represents how water moves through the watershed, from the upper reaches, through the urban setting, to the river estuary and out to sea. The park contains an actual watercourse engineered with a mechanical system. Several design elements mark the course of the river.

Water flows out of a central, eight-foot circular disk in a plaza at the uppermost corner of the site, meanders into a channel and continues down through the landscape. Designed by Art Share, a Los Angeles non-profit organization, the water feature is inlaid with tile work





A serpentine path of random flagstone converges with the watercourse and separates from it, bisecting the large open space into two grass lawns for community events.

depicting an idyllic scene of Spritzer Falls, including vegetation and wildlife found in the riparian environment.

The curvilinear stream course is surrounded by a recycled, broken concrete edge that symbolizes the Los Angeles River as it is today. As it does in the urban context, the river here moves into a straight-edged, concrete channel where it is alternately revealed and concealed. A continuous line of tumbled, recycled blue glass at the base of the channel suggests the essence of the river. Native grass, which grows in a grid pattern on the slope above, refers to the grass growing out of weep holes in the concrete channels of the L.A. River. As

the channel descends, it is surrounded by wetland plants and lined with greenish glass pebbles—like the river entering an estuary—where it mixes with the salt water of the sea. A pebbled area represents the river's arrival at the ocean. Water collects in the bottom pool where it is re-circulated, filtered and pumped back to the top. The vortex is a beautiful sculptural element that provides a sense of continuum, tying the water to its source and recalling the evaporation-transpiration cycle found in nature.

As Bullard appropriately states, "Abe's design says built forms can be beautiful. The park celebrates what the river is, in all its current forms, and what it can be." ■

CLIENT: Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (a joint powers agency of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy)

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