



BOB AND ROB SIPCHEN

# How We Learned to Love Los Angeles

But not stop worrying

Editor's Note: We asked noted writer Bob Sipchen and his son Rob, both ardent Angelenos and environmentalists, to defend LA's right to exist. Here is their somewhat conflicted response.

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**W**ater and people flow in interacting currents. It's important that a father and son keep this in mind as we take on one of the most important tasks ever assigned. For, if we understand our responsibility correctly, *Boom* has given us the San Andreas–like power to determine whether Los Angeles shall continue to exist.

Some of you living in environmentally sinful Southern California probably got nervous reading that last sentence. Well, it gets worse. Six years ago Bob, the older and more despotic of your judges, moved to San Francisco, where it is simply a given that Los Angeles has no right to inhabit the same planet, let alone the same coast, as the pretty little city by the bay. Abandon not all hope, though, for the younger and more forgiving Rob still lives in the heart of the metastasized megalopolis to the south.

Given the magnitude of our mission, it seems fitting to wade in with the observation that many Southern Californians get their first taste of regional planning as omnipotent child-giants, toes squishing into cool mud on the banks of tiny lakes and streams.

Bob first drove the tunnel-boring machine of his fingers through clotted dirt when he was five or six years old. Missionaries and agri-businessmen had introduced orange trees to Southern California in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and like the Native American corn farmers before them, they kept their sweet crop alive by channeling the water that spilled from the surrounding San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains. The trees spread across Southern California's semi-arid plains and rock-strewn alluvial fans. By the 1960s, Bob and his cousins could wait until water surged from concrete standpipes into furrows of recently plowed soil. Then they'd start burrowing, the scent of blossoms and hum of bees enflaming a beaverish drive.

Left unmanaged, water conspires with gravity and landscape to create patterns simple and complex. But a nimble strategy and decisive action can outpace water's relentless urge to seek its own course. And so these proto-engineers waded in to construct dams, channels, and reservoirs, even moving water over hills with siphons cut from garden hose. Soon enough, roads, rail lines, and bridges sprouted on the

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banks and inhabitants followed—green plastic soldiers, mainly, but also red and yellow cowboys and Indians. And the ever-hyperactive Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The kids got a notion of water's value the first time a farmworker chased them waving a hoe. They learned water politics through disputes that all-too-often led to bloodshed as power-hungry young combatants assaulted each other with oranges, dirt clods, and hand-packed mud balls that left satisfying smudges on sunburned backs. No one had to tell these planners that this is how civilizations emerge and expand. They didn't need to hear the nasty story of California's water wars to know that people are drawn to it, play with it, fight for it. They understood that water shapes lives.

By the time Rob the younger and his friends began constructing water worlds in the backyard of his family's home in Los Angeles' Mount Washington neighborhood, developers had uprooted the region's orange groves and tilted up thirsty beige housing tracts and the big box, Bed, Bath and Beyond monoculture to supply them. Nearer the less-homogenized urban core, Rob would gaze down from a plywood fort built on a brush-covered hillside, noting how the streams of cars, trucks, and trains along the 110 and I-5 corridors followed the concrete-lined paths of the Los Angeles River and Arroyo Seco.

Robert Fogelson's *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850–1930* quotes a British traveler's famous observation that of all major American cities, only Los Angeles offers “no plausible answer to the question, ‘Why did a town spring up here and why did it grow so big?’”

William Mulholland, whose grand water engineering efforts provide at least part of the answer to that question, often voiced the koan-like mantra: “If LA didn't get the water, it would never need it.” Of course, when Los Angeles *did* get the water, from local sources, and then the Owens Valley, and then the Colorado River, and then the Sacramento Delta, people *did* come from all over the country and all over the world to drink it, build with it, plant with it, play

in it. But the intersecting and largely segregated ethnic cultures did not always play nicely together.

In the sixties, the Watts Riots' fiery scent wafted like smog-pot stench into the San Bernardino Valley where the Sipchen family then lived. In the seventies, tear gas broke up brawls between black students who had just integrated San Geronio High School and white kids still mired in the type of thinking their parents had carried with them from the South. Twenty years later, while covering the Rodney King Riots for the *Los Angeles Times*, Bob and a *Times* photographer floated for hours in a helicopter over the smoldering city, marveling at the destruction. For months, Bob recorded the despair of Angelenos who had largely lost faith in their ability to pull their urban landscape together again.

Rob, born three years before the riots, blossomed in a Los Angeles whose public school children spoke ninety-two languages. Picnics at his magnet school erupted in cacophonous conversation fueled by an aromatic cornucopia of home-cooked *dim sum*, *kim chee*, *mee krob*, borsht, and lasagna, not to mention carne asada burritos.

After college, Rob returned with a renewed interest in the city and its waterways and transportation corridors. The LA River in particular intrigued him. He was bewildered that a city that survived by siphoning water through hundreds of miles of concrete channel allowed the region's sporadic floods to wash untapped into the sea. The city's subconscious, it seemed, had conceded to the car and accepted the river as a concrete scar, a sign that harmony with nature was a lost cause.

But water has an almost magical power to inspire, and so Rob also watched, impressed, as the Los Angeles River and Arroyo Seco became focal points for a pent-up collaborative energy among ethnic communities with the urgent need to improve their interdependent lives.

Back when developers alone ruled, there was no hope for Central Park designer Fredrick Olmstead's grand plans to turn the course of the LA River into tranquil parkways. Today, thanks to the tenacity of local activists, artists have replaced these drainages' protective chain link with inviting cut-metal gates depicting herons and cranes. Children wade into the muck to hunt pollywogs. Soccer players sing “olé-olé” on fields along the banks. And a few pioneers raft and kayak the river, sometimes outpacing the eighteen-wheelers that roll alongside on I-5.

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In his twenty-three years, Rob has watched a light rail system struggle to life along the Arroyo Seco and has seen people flock to new housing near the stations to take advantage of the route. A small hillside solar farm now converts energy from a sky that's far less gritty than when his father was a boy. In 2003, Occidental College professor Robert Gottlieb persuaded authorities to close the 110 freeway to motorized traffic for an event called Arroyo Fest. Rob and Bob joined thousands of other bicyclists and rode the euphoric multiethnic current straight down the fast lane, from Pasadena to downtown and back.

Back around the first Earth Day, Bob sometimes simmered in gridlock on the city's edges. Feeling the smog-cloaked

claustrophobia pressing in, he would imagine brushing Los Angeles off the earth with a few quick sweeps of his hand, just as he and his cousins periodically razed their orange grove civilizations to begin anew. Fixing the problems seemed too daunting. Better to wipe the slate clean and start moving earth, turning dystopia to utopia in one week, tops.

Having matured in some ways since then, Bob has come to see that resource allotment is more intricate when a place is inhabited by real people instead of the molded plastic soldier kind—who, conveniently, would follow any narrative he and his cousins concocted for them.

Years ago the Sipchen family visited Disney's Celebration, a master planned community outside Orlando, Florida.



## The polyglot city is pulling itself together around its use of water.

Designers had started from scratch there and created a ground-up cityscape complete with winter soap flake “snow flurries.” The antiseptic order gave Bob and Rob the willies.

Los Angeles is the organic antithesis of this architectonic approach to planning. And yet, in its unruly exuberant way, the polyglot city is pulling itself together around its use of water and other resources. A growing body of literature explores how constituents who used to punch each other in the face or worse are now cooperating to build a civic culture, in spite of the region’s Gordian knot of governance and dearth of civic vision. For example, in his 2007 book, *Reinventing Los Angeles*, Gottlieb details how Latinos, Asians, and Anglos conspired to revitalize swaths of land near the confluence of the Los Angeles River and Arroyo Seco as they flow through Glassell Park, Cypress Park, and into Chinatown and downtown LA. And a story in the Summer 2013 *On Earth* magazine details how area activists and maverick leaders have persuaded the city to recapture significant amounts of the wastewater it had been squandering.

In April, Bob joined a diverse throng of community leaders outside the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to celebrate the conclusion of many years’ political finagling over energy. Standing beside a burbling fountain-lake that reflects the environmental hubris of Los Angeles’ past, then-mayor Antonio Villaraigosa announced that the city would, by 2025, end its use of coal-fired power completely. Former Vice President Al Gore was on hand to

praise the initiative, which will significantly slow the flood of greenhouse gases that are disrupting Earth’s climate and hastening environmental catastrophe. “This is a big deal,” Gore said. “A big deal! Only five cities in the world are leaders in this . . . and Los Angeles is the only city in the United States.”

Gore’s comment hints at why Rob and Bob have, unanimously, come to a decision that some will see as sentimental sacrilege. We have decided that if the vast, semi-functional city of Los Angeles can’t find the gumption to take on the challenges of twenty-first century urban life, all the earth’s other mega-cities—and thus our species—are doomed.

Back in the days of rampant Chamber of Commerce boosterism, the *Los Angeles Times* predicted that the blossoming City of Angels would someday become “the center of tomorrow’s universe.” Perhaps naively, your judges believe that Angelenos, like children playing in a grove, may have just the combination of cantankerous spirit and irrepressible imagination to make this unlikely prophecy come true. And so we hereby spare you, Los Angeles, for, unsettling though this is to say, you probably represent the world’s last best hope to save itself. **B**

### Note

Bob Sipchen, who shared in two Pulitzer Prizes while a reporter, editor, and columnist at the *Los Angeles Times*, is Communications Director for the Sierra Club, editor in chief of *SIERRA* magazine, and an adjunct professor in the Writing and Rhetoric department at Occidental College. Rob Sipchen, a recent graduate of Cornell University’s Regional and Urban Planning Department, conducts data analysis for a software company and creates urban design-oriented art. The views in this essay are solely those of the authors and not necessarily their employers. Images of dioramas constructed and photographed on location in Los Angeles by Rob Sipchen.