

CARREN JAO

Reprogramming Blank Spaces in the City

Throughout every city, dozens, sometimes hundreds, or even thousands of parcels of land of all sizes sit unused and unloved. Some are owned by the city, some by state or local agencies; others are private. From small fragments of lots to sizeable plots, they are neglected resources for reprogramming the city.

The Bowtie Parcel

With creativity, many blank spaces on the map can become more than just voids in the fabric of city life. Take the Bowtie Parcel, an eighteen-acre post-industrial wasteland near downtown Los Angeles. Formerly owned by the Union Pacific Railroad, it sat empty for years. California State Parks bought the lot for \$10.7 million in 2003 but kept it closed to the public for a decade because it didn't have funds to develop a park. Sandwiched between railroad tracks, highways, and the concrete-encased Los Angeles River, and adjacent to a mostly residential neighborhood, the parcel doesn't attract many visitors on its own.

California State Parks still hopes to one day develop this lonely land into a public park. But while final plans and funding are being firmed up, it has ingeniously partnered with a nearby nonprofit arts organization, Clockshop, to activate the space, bringing more and more people to the abandoned site.

Every few months, commissioned artists take over portions of the Bowtie Parcel, giving Angelenos another reason to visit. Clockshop founder Julia Meltzer estimates that about 3,000 people have come to events at the site since the partnership with California State Parks started. The parcel has several permanent installations—an obelisk-shaped excavation in an asphalt pad on the site, adobe walls made on site and decorated with changing artwork and graffiti, pointedly political park-style signage that analyzes and comments on gentrification along the river. There have also

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Open Acres LA maps each publicly and privately owned vacant lot in Los Angeles.

been moonlit literary salons and overnight campouts beside the Los Angeles River for people from the surrounding neighborhoods, many of whom have never camped out before.

Sean Woods, LA sector supervisor for state parks, says the site's weirdly wild qualities and air of abandonment in the heart of the city attract an audience that cares deeply for the place. "People love the Bowtie in this state—a neglected, industrial landscape with the beauty of the Los Angeles River," he says. "The aesthetic really attracts artists. For them, it's a blank canvas."

But it's not just a site for artists. "This collaboration with Clockshop is artistic," Woods adds, "but it also touches on the larger issue of raising awareness of this open space by the Los Angeles River and the issues that surround it. We want to rally support for park development. For us, art is a vanguard of revitalization. It brings people to the site in a nontraditional way."

Programming the Bowtie Parcel has proved a signal success and an inspiration for imagining the future of not just this once forgotten piece of Los Angeles, but other neglected spaces throughout our metropolitan fabric.

Amigos de los Rios

For the nonprofit organization Amigos de los Rios, the blank canvas takes the form of billboard lots within the cities of Azusa, Baldwin Park, El Monte, South El Monte, Whittier, Montebello, and South Gate. In 2012, Amigos de los Rios worked with UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design professor Nicholas de Monchaux and a team of students to identify lots that could be repurposed into green spaces such as bird and butterfly habitat and wetlands.

Their first project transformed a quarter-acre trash dump in El Monte into a public recreation area filled with exercise equipment and plantings. For years, the students of the adjacent Madrid Middle School referred to this lot as "The Bones." Wedged between the school and an old metal factory, it was home to two billboard stands and 124 tons of garbage, abandoned sofas, television sets, and mattresses.

With funding from California Natural Resources, CALTRANS, and the California Community Foundation, and help from volunteers, including students from the middle



Vacant lot on Western Avenue. Photograph by Flickr user Joe.

school, and the California Conservation Corps and the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, the site was cleaned up. It now regularly hosts PE classes and marching band practice during school days. The school has arranged native-plant gardening sessions onsite.

Now Amigos de los Rios has its sights set on around 150 more billboard lots around town. If turned into welcoming green spaces, Loretta Quach, a senior associate at Amigos de los Rios, says these sites could add twenty to fifty more acres of green space to the surrounding neighborhoods.

LA Open Acres

In many parts of our cities, especially in the poorest neighborhoods, valuable plots of land lie trapped behind unsightly wire fences. These lots could be so much more. They could be pocket parks, urban gardens, or landmarks for public art. Rather than sitting derelict, they could change the lives of thousands of people who live nearby

To bring these forgotten pieces of land to light, a nonprofit organization called Community Health Councils developed LA Open Acres—an interactive map that

identifies all of the vacant lots, both privately and publicly owned, in Los Angeles—in collaboration with C-Lab (the Columbia University Laboratory for Architectural Broadcasting) and a group called 596 Acres with support from the Goldhirsch Foundation through an LA2050 grant.

The site collects publicly available information on vacant lots garnered from GIS data from city departments, fieldwork by community researchers, satellite imagery, and existing mapping software. It also includes a status update on each piece of property, plus information on its owner. Before LA Open Acres, no public agency or nonprofit had identified all of these fallow pieces of land in the city. And this lack of information was a major hurdle for anyone interested in repurposing a piece of vacant land.

About 90 percent of the land mapped is in private hands, estimates Malcolm Carson, general counsel and policy director for environmental health at Community Health Councils. The remaining 10 percent is owned by the city. Carson says researchers found many reasons for land to remain vacant. “Agencies often inherit these little parcels and there’s no strategic plan or imperative to do any work on



Vacant lot on Marmion Way. Photograph by Umberto Bray, via Flickr.

them,” he says. “They usually have to concentrate on the day-to-day work of delivering power, transportation, and water to the city.”

Some plots are so small, oddly shaped, or so contaminated that it is often more expensive to repurpose them than to leave them fallow. Should a lot meet the minimum size for a park, agencies would have to expend even more resources trying to figure out who should maintain any future park that would take shape on the property.

Vacant private lots often have a similar backstory. “The tax system in California encourages nondevelopment of parcels,” says Carson. Improving a property usually results in an increase in taxes, although he says that turning a lot into an urban agriculture project could merit up to a 90 percent reduction in taxes.

Every bit of land, no matter how odd, can have an impact, according to Carson. “These pieces of land aren’t marketable, but they’re good for us. There aren’t many parcels of land so small that you can’t even put a bench on it,” he says. Even oddball lots can have a more productive life, not just as full-fledged parks, but as pocket community gardens and gathering spaces. The key is to determine what a community

needs and how any plot of unloved land can be part of a solution.

Farm LA

A number of scrappy nonprofits are now eagerly scouring LA Open Acres to find land. One of them is Farm LA, a fledgling nonprofit started by Emily Gleicher and Jason Wood, an Elysian Valley couple dedicated to sustainable living.

Gleicher says she feels like Sherlock Holmes, investigating a mystery using the information LA Open Acres provides on each lot, as they hunt for plots of land with owners who might be willing to see their vacant property transformed into a productive urban farm.

Using the interactive map, the couple has been narrowing down their search for unbuildable lots on narrow streets or small plots that stay vacant because no owner wants to pay for necessary street improvements. Gleicher and Wood would like to turn these lots into drought-tolerant agricultural gardens. They are hoping a recently passed California state bill, AB 551, which gives property owners five-year tax

deductions in exchange for allowing their land to be used for agricultural purposes, will encourage owners to work with Farm LA. They've already pitched the concept to a number of neighborhood councils.

They're focusing their search in LA's "food deserts," communities with few sources for fresh food. "We want to bring those communities affordable access to organic food, and education on solar and water generation, as well as beautify the neighborhood," says Gleicher. Wood, who also works at a solar company, hopes to install solar and greywater systems on plots.

They've got big dreams for these small lots. Gleicher and Wood imagine LA living off the land.

"We have this Armageddon vision," says Wood, "where LA could have solar panels running water generators that's going through a drip line feeding an entire plot of land with no maintenance. Los Angeles could convert back into a desert, but that system will continue to provide water that grows food for people. It's totally within the realm of what's possible."

In the meantime, they're not sitting idle. They're converting curbsides on their own street in Elysian Valley into drought-tolerant herb and vegetable gardens.

#FreeLotsLosAngeles

Sometimes an ephemeral change is enough to reimagine these neglected spaces in the city.

The Community Health Councils recently began #FreeLotsLosAngeles, pop-up events at which the nonprofit works with a property owner to remake a vacant lot just for one day. Much as the wildly successful CicLAvia events help city residents imagine what it's like to live car-free for a day, these pop-up events ignite a community's imagination for the abandoned spaces in their midst.

Last spring, after three months of workshops with the community and with the help of the city's Great Streets Initiative, the council turned a derelict lot at the corner of Forty-first Street and Central Avenue from an intimidating space full of graffiti, aluminum sheets, and barbed wire into a kind of wonderland. Wood palettes became platforms filled with children's blocks, display tops for succulent plantings, and a lending library. A silvery shade sculpture hung above the lot, as a mariachi trio entertained the crowd, a yoga class for newbies stretched their limbs, and children kicked a soccer ball around.

For a day, anyway, this forgotten space became a vibrant part of life in the city. **B**

Members of temporary dance company WXPT perform *evereachmore* at the Bowtie Parcel beside the Los Angeles River.

COURTESY CLOCKSHOP AND GINA CLYNE.

