In the early 1900’s, the Los Angeles River was understood as both a vital resource and an unreliable hindrance to the city’s development, leading to the outsourcing of water and the river bank’s encasement in concrete. Recently, local efforts have been made to reimagine the river as either a local water supply in line with its historical use or a novel site of recreation. However, these contemporary proposals directly conflict with each other, leading to our current situation where the L.A. River remains unchanged, polluted, and largely forgotten within the metropolis. Additionally, they each speak to continued conceptions of the river as a utility.

Abstract

In the early 1900’s, the Los Angeles River was understood as both a vital resource and an unreliable hindrance to the city’s development, leading to the outsourcing of water and the river bank’s encasement in concrete. Recently, local efforts have been made to reimagine the river as either a local water supply in line with its historical use or a novel site of recreation. However, these contemporary proposals directly conflict with each other, leading to our current situation where the L.A. River remains unchanged, polluted, and largely forgotten within the metropolis. Additionally, they each speak to continued conceptions of the river as a utility.

Methods and Protocols

We conducted our research through a close reading of the following selected sources from the Western Water Archives:

- A 1904 Letter to the Board of Directors of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce
- A 1904 Letter from William Mulholland to Charles D. Walcott

We compared the themes of these sources to the themes conveyed in newspapers and municipal reports from the 2000’s.

Research Objective

Our objective is to discover and analyze the transformation of ideologies surrounding the Los Angeles River as an entity between the early 1900’s and the contemporary era in order to consider the future of the Los Angeles River in all of its possible forms, as various stakeholders continue to pursue further manipulations of the river.

Background and Perspectives

1904: Letter to Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce. “The sources from which the deficiency between supply and demand has been made up in the past two years cannot be strictly regarded as permanent sources”

1934: Report of the Los Angeles River Water supply. “In fact, greater diversions can greatly be made before the surplus of water now passing through the Narrows of the Los Angeles River will be materially affected.”

2017: Whitewashing the Los Angeles River? Gente-fication not Gentrification. “There is growing evidence, however, that green displacement is destroying equal opportunity along the river.”

2000: Boys’ Drowning Revive Debate on L.A. River Safety. The boys’ drownings, “rekindled the debate over the safety of the Los Angeles River at a time when the county’s main flood control channels [were] being increasingly opened up for recreation.”

2018: What role should the L.A. River play in the future or Los Angeles. “It’s going to be a tough tightrope to walk,” said Mark Gold. “If we go all in on water recycling and stormwater infiltration and capture, then there’s not going to be enough water left for a thriving river.”

Conclusions

Persistent theme of L.A. River as a water source for the city of Los Angeles

Persistent theme of the L.A. river as an unreliable hindrance to Los Angeles

Emerging consideration for the L.A. River as a recreation space

Imagining the future of the L.A. River reflects the historical pattern of the manipulation of the L.A. river for the benefit of the people of Los Angeles.
Bibliography

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