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A SQUARE ON A SEAM



A FORGOTTEN STRETCH OF LAND FINDS NEW LIFE AS A LINEAR PARK.

BY NATE BERG

TOP AND INSET

A linear park with a mix of amenities makes use of a five-block stretch along Highway 105 in Lynwood, California.

RIGHT

A bioswale runs the length of the park, which is just 45 feet wide.

Along the 19-mile stretch south of Los Angeles that was bulldozed to build Interstate 105, there are acres of leftover space, not quite freeway and not quite city. This land, a buffer between the bermed freeway and the various communities it tore apart, has sat in limbo for decades. But a new project in the working-class city of Lynwood, across the interstate from Compton, has transformed a segment of this buffer zone into a mile-long linear park.

Officially opened as Ricardo Lara Linear Park and named after a state senator, the 5.25-acre park was designed by the Los Angeles office of SWA Group, led by principals Ying-Yu Hung, ASLA, and Gerdo

Aquino, FASLA. Sitting between a two-lane street and the hillside leading up to the freeway's sound wall, it's one of a handful of small projects the firm has designed on remnant urban sites. "We're into that sort of weird condition," Hung says.

Averaging 45 feet in width, this five-block stretch had been a flood-prone dumping ground for decades. In 2002, the city persuaded Caltrans, the state department of transportation, to sell the land. "They were able to give it to us at a relatively—well, a dirt-cheap price," says Bruno Naulls, a community development associate for the City of Lynwood. For \$1,000 a block, the city suddenly had a very affordable opportunity.

A housing development was proposed and two model homes were built, but the recession hit and the project dissolved. Lynwood started thinking about filling its glaring need for new parks.

In U.S. cities, the median park space per 1,000 residents is 12.5 acres, according to the Trust for Public Land. In Lynwood, a city of predominantly low- and moderate-income Hispanic residents,



ABOVE SWA planted more than 300 trees, specifically selected for the urban site and the Southern California climate.

that figure is 0.6 acres. Naulls calls the city a “park desert.” Around 2011, city officials applied for a grant enabled by Proposition 84, which offers up to \$5 million for the creation of parks in disadvantaged communities. In March 2012, Lynwood received \$4,949,957.

The city worked with a community engagement group called From Lot to Spot that focuses on the reuse of vacant land to determine what residents would want from a new park. “We’re no longer operating within this old template of the square in the center of the city,” says Viviana Franco, the executive director of From Lot to Spot. “I think it’s good. It pushes designers. It pushes cities

and communities to think creatively about how to make more green urban space.”

After a proposal and two rounds of interviews, SWA got the job. The team’s design distributed the community’s desired amenities over the five blocks of the site, with a dog park, a fitness park with workout machines, a playground, a community garden and pavilion, and an ecological section focused on retention of the water that drains from the freeway during rains. A one-mile walking trail winds from end to end, and a 4.5-foot-deep bioswale runs the length of the park’s border with Caltrans’s right-of-way. “A lot of the budget went into just the sheer distance of things,” Hung says.

SWA had just three months to go from concept to construction documents. “Within a narrow, 45-foot stretch, there are all these layers: pedestrian, planting, the actual programs, vegetation, the bioswale, and even parking lots,” Hung says. The two model homes from the failed development remain on the site, a bit awkwardly, as does a power station for a nearby light-rail line. “Every six inches makes a difference,” she says.

Construction began in December 2014. More than 300 trees were planted, and SWA based its planting palette on the master plan for the nearby Los Angeles River, which prioritizes native plants that provide potential wildlife habitat and require minimal water and maintenance.

On a recent weekday morning, just weeks after the grand opening, older residents could be seen walking the park’s trail and doing shoulder presses on a workout machine. Nearby, toddlers were playing, going up and down a slide. Though occasionally fretting over graffiti on mosaic-decorated benches and tables, Hung is nonetheless optimistic about the park. She sees room for more projects like it. “This is only one stretch of the 105 freeway,” she says. “All those other sites can be harvested for some kind of purpose.” ●

