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Elysian Park
A Century of Municipal Neglect
Andrea Thabet

Elysian Park is arguably the least known park space in Los Angeles, yet its central location means most Angelenos have traveled through the park without even realizing it. Located just outside of downtown Los Angeles (L.A.), the 575-acre park is accessible by Interstate 5 and the 110 freeway, which literally passes through its easternmost section. Elysian Park hugs Dodger Stadium on three sides, and the ballpark’s Stadium Way runs directly through it. The park’s landscaped picnic grounds, recreational spaces, and several water features are surrounded by steep hills, rocky terrain, deep ravines, and overgrown hiking trails. Home to Chavez Ravine Arboretum, Southern California’s oldest arboretum, the park and its serene spaces provide a welcome respite from urban life, while its monumental vistas offer stunning views that reveal the sheer magnitude of the city’s urban character. Founded in 1886, Elysian Park is protected by L.A.’s City Charter, which guarantees all designated park land will remain in “perpetual public use.” Over the course of more than a century, Elysian Park has undergone “periods of careful maintenance and valued use,” but more frequently has suffered from “cycles of neglect” and inconsistent funding to maintain grounds and programming. Since the 1930s, the park has repeatedly lost acreage to various municipal projects or development schemes. Such attempts to appropriate park land for non-park purposes have taken a toll on the landscape by irrevocably altering both the character and usage of the park. While the construction of Dodger Stadium has had perhaps the most visible impact, it was the decision by the L.A. City Council in 1965 to construct a convention center in Elysian Park that would prove to be a watershed moment in the park’s history.

Historical Perspective
While the founding of Elysian Park in 1886 suggests that the L.A. City Council acted in step with a nationwide municipal parks movement, the evidence points to a much different explanation. During the late 19th century, public parks began to play an important role in debates about urban environments and the need for green space to encourage the development of a “good society.” While these “largely Atlantic Coast ideas” about public parks found support in Eastern cities, establishment of such spaces in less developed Western cities was a more difficult prospect. With its semi-agricultural economy and
(continued)
Elysian Park (continued)

a ready availability of land, the L.A. of this period had little need for public parks. Moreover, city officials typically deplored public land ownership because they could not derive property tax revenue from it. L.A.'s oldest city parks came from direct donation (Griffith Park, 1896) or through default (MacArthur Park, 1887), and typically these lands were considered worthless or at least unfit for any profitable venture.4 Thus, boosting land values likely motivated city leaders to create Elysian Park more than any belief in the need for public green space. The “dollar-minded” City Council supported the creation of a downtown public park because it enhanced the “attractiveness of the city” for long-term investment and increased the land value of the park’s immediate surroundings. Soon after Elysian Park’s establishment, several upper-class neighborhoods developed nearby, including Angelino Heights (1887) and Echo Park (1891).5

Although Elysian Park’s design was based on the tenets of the American Park Movement, which emphasized beauty and tranquility, it also drew on an emerging national playground movement that promoted specialized features like play equipment and picnic areas. Like earlier park proponents, playground advocates believed organized recreational spaces would provide social value, help prevent juvenile delinquency, and create better citizens.6 By the turn of the 20th century, Elysian Park had become “an attractive, rustic municipal wilderness,”7 a “prime tourist attraction,” and “one of the foremost ‘City Beautiful’ parks in the country.”8 Still, city leaders remained ambivalent about park spaces during the first half of the 20th century, as evidenced by inconsistent maintenance and improvement policies. Elysian Park thus remained somewhat neglected and overgrown, aided by the decline of its surrounding neighborhoods.

Nevertheless, even in L.A., Progressive Era ideas emphasizing the link between public parks and a better society retained their power well into the 20th century. In 1947, the City decided to merge its Recreation Department with the Park Department, which aided the protection of both parks and playgrounds under the City Charter, but also made park needs subservient to recreation. The merger occurred on the heels of a $39.5 million bond issue passed in 1945, the largest bond issue ever in an American city at that time.9 Yet even with an expanded Recreation and Parks Department and the 1945 bond funds, the need for additional park space in L.A. remained acute. The long history of indifference toward the need for public green space translated into only 4 percent of dedicated park space in L.A. by 1965. By comparison, San Francisco and New York City had 13 and 17 percent, respectively, of their acreage devoted to parks.10 A 1966 California Department of Parks and Recreation study reinforced the concern that L.A. desperately needed more park space—not only was the city deficient in adequate green space for current residents, but by 1980 it would need an additional 80,000 acres to provide sufficient facilities for its population.11 Thus it is all the more perplexing that in 1965, the L.A. City Council and Mayor Samuel Yorty approved a proposal to build a convention center on 63 acres of prime park land in a park-poor city.

Assaults on Elysian Park’s Acreage

Despite City Charter protections, in practice L.A.’s public parks remained vulnerable to encroachment. Prior to the 1965 convention center proposal, Elysian Park repeatedly was a target for non-park development, and the projects that succeeded limited, circumvented, or denied park space to the public. A prime example of this phenomenon was the City Council’s approval for the establishment of a police academy training facility in 1936 on 21 acres at the center of Elysian Park. Another was the construction of L.A.’s first freeway in the 1930s. The Pasadena Freeway (I-110) eliminated 30 acres by cutting directly through the park and effectively isolating one small section from the rest.12 Post-World War II federal policies also contributed to the destruction of park spaces by sanctioning condemnation if the land was needed for a “public purpose,” such as highway construction. California officials used the policy liberally all over the state. Elysian and Griffith Parks, among many others in Los Angeles, saw their acreage reduced for highway construction.13

More significantly, in 1959 the City gave away approximately 300 acres of

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Chavez Ravine, which included roughly 30 acres of Elysian Park, for the construction of Dodger Stadium. This helped reinforce the view that park space was merely undeveloped land that could be successfully appropriated by the City for non-park purposes. Dodger Stadium’s construction damaged Elysian Park’s irrigation system, and the ballpark’s six-lane Stadium Way brought high-speed traffic through the park’s most popular valley. Despite the ballpark traffic and municipal neglect, residents from nearby Latino and Asian communities heavily patronized the park, including some founding members of the Citizen’s Committee to Save Elysian Park (CCSEP).

When the City Council voted to build a convention center in Elysian Park in March 1965, the decision launched an 18-month controversy over where the facility belonged before the plan was finally rejected in August 1966. Elysian Park was targeted as an attractive possibility for two reasons. First, the park was technically unoccupied City-owned land, which saved the City from land acquisition expenses, including costly eminent domain proceedings at other potential sites. Also, the City Council set a $10 million limit on construction, which made the municipally owned land less costly, at least in theory. Second, the park was a short drive from downtown Los Angeles, with easy freeway access. Simply put, the Elysian Park convention center proposal called for the clearance of 63 acres of the park's land—and not just any 63 acres, but the best and most frequently used section of the park, which included picnic grounds and the Recreation Lodge.

The City’s Parks and Recreation Commission approved the convention center proposal, thinking that it could potentially improve the park’s grounds and facilities. Under the terms of the proposal, $300,000 would go toward improving park facilities and replacing or relocating recreational facilities torn down to make way for construction. The director of the Recreation and Parks Department argued that it would increase Elysian Park’s aesthetic and civic value, and act as “the catalyst for development of the most beautiful city park in the world … a ‘jewel unmatched anywhere.’” Convention center proponents were also aided by the lack of an open space designation in the City’s zoning codes—all parks in L.A. were designated...
as commercial, residential, or parking spaces. The City Council’s decision sparked a fierce response led by Grace E. Simons, founder of the CCSEP. Simons and the Committee launched a precedent-setting protest that saved Elysian Park’s most popular valley from destruction, in the process establishing an important model for local preservation activities that remains influential today. For Simons, the preservation of precious park space in a rapidly growing metropolis was paramount to improving the quality of life for current and future residents. The main issue was whether the park would be “preserved inviolate for use of the people or plundered for private gain.”

A diminutive woman, Simons was surprisingly successful at cowing others with her well-formed arguments, sharp wit, and tenacious approach. Simons and the CCSEP crafted a vigorous, well-organized, and inventive campaign with two overarching goals: first, to protect Elysian Park from immediate threats; and second, to chart a new environmental course for the city by pressing for permanent policy changes. They succeeded through letter-writing campaigns, public speeches, rallies, and petitions, and by securing radio, television, and print media coverage of their activities. They tapped into ongoing local and national conservation initiatives, and Simons mobilized a broad coalition of local residents and park users, labor leaders, and conservation organizations. She also secured the support of several City Council members and U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, a longtime conservationist. The Committee also won over L.A.’s prolific modernist design community—including architects John Lautner, Gregory Ain, A. Quincy Jones, landscape architect Garrett Eckbo, famed architectural photographer Julius Shulman, and author Ray Bradbury. In a word, the campaign was impressive.

Simons and the CCSEP put together a multi-pronged strategy based on three important principles: identify irrefutable arguments against the proposal, grab and keep the attention of politicians and the public by broadcasting the protest in every way possible, and protect the park through political and legal action. The Committee’s well-formed arguments were difficult to ignore. First, the proposal violated the City Charter, which stated all dedicated park land must “forever remain” for “use of the public inviolate; but permission may be given for any park purpose.” Because convention center events and exhibits would be private and restricted, the proposal went against the provision that park (continued)
land be reserved for park use and public use. The Committee argued that ignoring the Charter “set a precedent which would endanger all public parks in Los Angeles.” Simons accused the City Council of viewing park space as “merely ... [land] ‘in storage’ to be used for other purposes at the whim of ... city officials.”

Second, the Committee publicized the inaccuracy of the $10 million cost estimate by pointing out the plan’s hidden costs, based on a July 1965 City engineering study. The study estimated that hill grading, storm drain construction, and road widening would cost between $3.5 and $7 million—none of which was included in the $10 million price tag under the original proposal, and almost all of which would be paid for by the City. If the main justification for placing the center in Elysian Park was to stay within the $10 million cap, the engineering report made clear that Elysian Park was actually the least attractive site.

Simons and the CCSEP also deliberately framed the park battle as a class issue, arguing that public parks served as a virtual backyard for those lacking one, and this was especially true in Elysian Park because of its proximity to working-class neighborhoods. The park’s users were community groups and families who “do not own estates of their own, who cannot luxuriate in private swimming pools and who cannot afford to send their children to summer camps.” Where, Simons asked in one speech, will youngsters go when the park is taken away from them; they “do not have chauffeur-driven cars to take them to the hills and the spas. Elysian Park is their playground.”

The Committee’s membership roster and petition signatures revealed a cross-class and multi-racial grassroots alliance. Supporters lived in every city council district and all parts of L.A. County, in neighborhoods ranging from the most affluent, such as Beverly Hills and Palos Verdes, to the poorest, like Angelino Heights, which had once been affluent. Committee supporters even included residents of Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Diego Counties.

The vast demographic scope of those opposed to the project shows how deeply the issue touched a wide range of people and reflected broader concerns over urban growth and planning in Los Angeles, especially when a project led by elites seemed to be masquerading as a public good.

As part of its grassroots strategy, the CCSEP looked for simple but effective ways to make a point. Its inventive “Leaves for Parks” campaign encouraged residents to collect leaves and send them to City Hall to remind Mayor Yorty and City Council members of the beauty they might destroy. If Simons could not get politicians to attend rallies and events in the Elysian Park, she would send the park to them. CCSEP’s activities ultimately forced the
City Council to reconsider the convention center’s location by not allowing the mayor and the business establishment to quietly push the park proposal through without public discussion.

From the beginning, Simons and the CCSEP emphasized that the convention center proposal was a threat to all public parks in Los Angeles and framed their work as an important, precedent-setting battle. This moment represented a siren call to Angelenos to challenge the direction of urban policy, to demand more and better park and recreation facilities, and to imagine a future for L.A. that emphasized the human element first and foremost.

But even before they squashed the convention center plans, the CCSEP fought to save Elysian Park from other threats. In late 1965, they took legal action to stop a plan to lease 77 park acres for oil drilling and successfully stopped a plan to widen Stadium Way—a road expansion that would have destroyed one of the oldest and most treasured parts of the park—the Avenue of the Palms, planted in 1895 and declared a City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument in April 1967.

By 1970, the Committee convinced the City to create a master plan for Elysian Park, believing that this would provide a political and legal basis for protecting the park and would help thwart all threats to open space in Los Angeles. The City Council adopted the Elysian Park Master Plan in 1972. A revised Master Plan was produced in 2006. The City also produced an Open Space Plan in 1973, as required by California state law.

Despite the City’s efforts to establish an environmental policy, encroachment on L.A.’s public parks continued. Later threats to Elysian Park included proposals for a police helipad, a freeway expansion, a cultural center, and a day-care center for City employees. Voters also approved a City Charter amendment in 1972 that granted the City’s police academy permanent status in the park, officially transferring 21.4 acres from the Department of Recreation and Parks to the Board of Public Works. During the CCSEP’s fight to defeat the amendment, a 6-year-old boy was injured by a live grenade found in a section of the park not used by the academy, but which admittedly came from a Los Angeles Police Department training exercise the week before. The young boy’s disfigurement did nothing to deter Angelenos from granting the academy permanent status. Voters also defeated a proposition in the late 1970s to fund much-needed irrigation in Elysian Park. The Committee later felt this defeat was one of the causes of a destructive fire in the early 1980s that burned 300 acres, including the beloved Recreation Lodge.

More recently, Elysian Park’s aesthetics have been threatened by a proposal to sell off park-adjacent land owned by Barlow Respiratory Hospital, a private hospital on 25 acres at the Elysian Park’s southwestern edge, close to the Avenue of the Palms. Nearly a century old, the hospital wants to replace its existing facilities to meet legal seismic requirements and has proposed to finance the cost of new construction through the sale of 19 unused acres to a private developer. Not only would the sale require zoning and land-use changes, it would also threaten the park’s aesthetics and quality of life for nearby residents of Echo Park, Silver Lake, and Elysian Valley. The Los Angeles Times reported that development plans include the construction of high-density housing without adequate parking spaces. Although Barlow’s CEO claims the plans will enhance the neighborhood, offer valuable services, and provide limited job creation, the new development would increase traffic and parking congestion in the area surrounding Elysian Park’s most popular grounds. A group of local citizens has organized a protest campaign that is clearly modeled on the strategies employed by Simons and the CCSEP in 1965.

Endnotes


2. Elysian Park: New Strategies; Cornell, Bridgers & Troller, A Master Plan for Development of Elysian Park (City of Los Angeles, Department of Recreation and Parks, May 1971); Withers & Sandgren.


5. Diri, 162–168.

6. Eberts, 600–604; Young, 4–7, 10–11.


12. Eberts, 596; Davis, 254.
The LAPD Cascade at Elysian Park
Phoebe Cutler

Among the rash of garden cascades that sprouted in Southern California in the 1920s and ’30s, it is both ironic and unlikely that one of the best preserved and most spectacular should be a rustic composition fully launched and owned by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). An ancient garden type, the cascade found favor among the glitterati of Hollywood, the wintering elite of Santa Barbara, and even one enterprising real estate developer. The water chain designed by Cook Hall and Cornell about 1927 for Peter Snyder filled three large blocks of a proposed subdivision in Monterey Park. Its spare, Spanish modeling contrasted with the more naturalistic versions adopted by the handful of park planners—most notably in the port city of San Pedro—who embraced the genre. As appropriately rustic as those latter structures might have appeared, the rocks were in fact made of concrete. The LAPD cascade in Elysian Park belongs to this group, but at the same time, thanks to its creator, exists in a class of its own.

One of the immediate inspirations for the Police Cascade came not from such well-known, classic Italianate precedents as Harold Lloyd’s in Beverly Hills or Henry Kern’s in Holmby Hills, but rather from the highly crafted interior of a popular cafeteria in downtown Los Angeles—“Clifton’s Brookdale.” The cafeteria, which opened in 1935, was the genius of Clifford Clinton, who as a youth in San Francisco was inspired by the redwoods of Santa Cruz. More specifically, he wanted to emulate the plein air dining experience of Boulder Creek’s Brookdale Lodge—the handiwork of landscape architect Horace Cotton (1891-1972). There, tables and chairs shared space under a high skylight with redwoods, giant chain ferns, and a natural-running waterfall and stream.

Purveying cheap meals and a wrap-around forest atmosphere, its Los Angeles namesake drew a crowd from street and stage. It featured a 20-foot-high waterfall, a stream, steel columns disguised as redwoods, and a forest-scene mural.

Off duty, the Los Angeles police could relax at Clifton’s. Both on and off for a decade, they had been frequenting a remote ravine in Elysian Park. There, under pressure from the Prohibition crime wave of the 1920s, they had been perfecting their marksmanship. The rounds of pistol practice took on a social dimension, and the LAPRAAC (Los Angeles Police Revolver and Athletic Club) was born. A dorm from the 1932 Olympics was relocated to the site to house a club. Plans for a garden followed. LAPRAAC acquired Park Commission approval and held a fund-raiser. The artisan behind the stream and falls at Clifton’s Brookdale, François Scotti, was hired.

Scotti (1889-1959) represented the third generation of French-Italian contractors who, since the 19th century, had been producing rocailles (rockeries) and maçonnerie en ciment (cement masonry). In 1909 or 1910, Robert P. Butchart, a Canadian cement manufacturer vacationing in Monte Carlo, admired the work of the Casa Rustica company. The North American mogul hired the young heir to the business to come for a year to Victoria Island, where he and his wife were launching an elaborate garden.

For the garden in Tod Inlet, Scotti cast posts and pergolas. After about a year of working there, Scotti moved to Los Angeles. Initially, the young artisan struggled to make a go of his new location, but then in 1915, a job brought him to the attention of Minneapolis entrepreneur Charles M. Loring. Loring, like Butchart before him, had been to the Riviera and returned with enormous admiration for the rustic rockwork he saw—specifically, in his case, a feature in the grounds of the Monte Carlo Casino. Thirty years on, Loring drew the connection between that faraway faux rockwork and an exhibit (the stream of the Japanese tea garden?) at the Panama Exposition in San Diego. He at once engaged the scion of Casa Rustica to build two multi-story cascades—one on the side of Mt. Rubidoux at his winter home in Riverside, and the other at Glenwood Park in Minneapolis.

The California monument known as the “St. Francis Fountain” still presides over the base of Mt. Rubidoux. Although the Glenwood Park cascade no longer exists, in its heyday that enhanced water course drew from Theodore Wirth, longtime Minneapolis superintendent of parks, the pronouncement that it was “such a true imitation of the natural rock formation of this section as to make it difficult for the layman to believe that the cliffs and rocks are not Nature’s own creation.”

In between the Rubidoux and Loring cascades and the humbler interior version of Clifton’s Brookdale, Scotti was advancing his craft. He explained in a letter to Robert Butchart that, after much experimentation, he had developed “new formulas” that “will enable me to produce on a much larger scale.” Accelerated production would have been critical for the success of the commission in Elysian Park, but also for a 1930-1931 work relief project in mountainous Griffith Park in nearby Hollywood. The general public would have been familiar—more even than with the Brookdale cafeteria—with this simulation of a rocky canyon stream; it was an extension of the popular Fern Dell at Western Avenue and Los Feliz Boulevard. The robust rocks, informally stacked, irregular and creased, exhibit all the earmarks of being Scotti’s handiwork. From among his, at this point, little-known oeuvre, the LAPD cliff construction can be regarded as Scotti’s masterpiece. Its Chavez Ravine site is a remarkable merger of diffuse planting, falling water, and artificial rock. The steepness and scale of the raw site—about 400 feet wide and 60 feet high with an approximate 20-degree
Cascade at Elysian Park (continued)
rise—makes the ultimate achievement even more admirable. The sculptor’s remit would have included tying the garden in with the social function of the clubhouse, the second floor of which is level with the cascade’s base. At this base, Scotti graded a 40-foot-deep patio, which once sported a now-covered-over trout pond. A blackened barbecue, tucked into a rock ledge in the southeast corner, is probably not still employed for the numerous weddings and retirement parties that take place in this picturesque setting. A circle of pines on the outer, or west, edge of the terrace initiates the well-tended and luxuriant planting scheme that greatly enhances the overall effect of this obscure Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Heritage Monument.6

The rock garden-combination-cascade rises in a sequence of six additional levels with a total of four pools or basins. At the center of the entry terrace, water spills over a pair of ledges into a terminal basin. Twin walls draped with greenery protrude on either side of the pool. Coved seats, also concrete, bracket the walls, while a matching pair of stairs lead to the next level. Here the garden takes on a new character, opening out into a larger pool and an amphitheater-like space. Three tiers of narrow seating flank a third, central fall. The plant palette expands, with bamboo joining more pines. Azaleas, shaped camelias, sword ferns, and photiniyas emerge from pockets in the rocks and from scattered beds. Equally dramatic are three rock piers. The piers rise from the semi-circle layering of rock that, backing up the tiered seating, spans out from the central rill.

Another pool and two more narrow cascades take the visitor to a fourth level, where a brick walk leads one past a semicircular wall, a grotto, and two soaring banana specimens. Furthering the chromatic effect, the ivy-draped wall is made of concrete blocks accented with large sandstone slabs. Similarly accented walls encircle the next two and final levels. The top layer introduces seating nooks, or hemicycles—classical features that, along with the twin stairways and the loosely symmetrical composition, speak to the Italian origins of this rock fantasy. At this level, a modern intrusion—a panoramic view of downtown Los Angeles—at once elevates and grounds the visitor.

In any or all of his fountain or cliff constructions, Scotti’s dual heritage would have been indispensable. Even without knowing Scotti’s paternal roots or his native Menton’s location near the French-Italian border, the LAPD’s cascade brings to mind such 16th and 17th-century papal monuments as the Villa Lante or the Villa d’Este.

On the French side, the sculptor was heir to an almost as distinguished tradition. As early as the mid-16th century, Renaissance gardens around Paris incorporated rustic grottos and stony mounds. Three hundred years later, the landscape designer and contractor J. Lalos, in an instructive tract, sought to discourage amateurs from putting their talents to work creating artificial streams. Instead, he promoted his own grand projects, notably one Cascade de la Motte, where he built 2 rockeries and, for further adornment, 17 cascades in a now-forgotten estate’s stream. Not long after Lalos, rocks formed from concrete began to replace the natural object.7 The mid-19th-century date given for the rise of that fashion would make Scotti’s grandfather one of its pioneering artisans.

The view from the summit, as well as intermittent sightings of the recently upgraded pistol range just north of the café, intrude upon romantic thoughts of the hills of Tivoli or the reaches of the Seine basin. Furthermore, Scotti, now 25 years in Southern California, was eager, as he had been in Minneapolis, to adapt his art to the region. Indeed, while he was creating the Loring Cascade, he was also working on a project in Glendora in the San Gabriel Valley where, as reported to John McLaren, he was trying to incorporate the layers of the Grand Canyon. His mention of that natural monument as early as 1918 suggests that the LAPD’s 1937 description of “simulated sandstone strata, artistically designed to produce

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CASA RUSTICA

BASSINS EN FER ET CIMENT
ROCAILLES
EN TOUT GENRES
BALLAGES EN CIMENT
Maisonnerie Rustique

J. D. Scottie
ENTREPRENEUR - CIMENTEUR
Route de l'Abattoir - MENTON

181 Menton
Le 12 Mars 1913

Monseigneur Brunet-Chaz
Il y a d'une ans que mon fils
Cascade at Elysian Park (continued)

changing color effects as suggested by the Grand Canyon …” could only have come from the artist himself.8

Tinting was another area for Scotti’s experimentation. As attested by the plaque at the foot of the cascade, he now called his business “Concrete Rockcraft and Chemical Coloring.” In the decade since the author first viewed this rock feat, natural processes, especially the falling water, have intensified its reds and oranges. In sum, the French concrete artist employed his medium with an expertise that should rank him with better-known local craftsmen of the period—artisans such as ceramicists Glen Lukens and Beatrice Wood and furniture designer Paul Frankl. Scotti was working more closely with traditional models than his fellow European immigrants, the architects Richard Neutra and Otto Schindler, but his use of concrete was much more experimental. Unlike these artists-of-the-curved-wall-and-the-cantilever, Scotti—artisan-of-the-stream-and-the-cliff—is unknown. His achievement in Elysian Park (and, ostensibly, Griffith Park before it) argues for a comparable recognition of his abilities. ■

Endnotes
3. According to its website, the family-owned, for-profit Butchart Gardens receives over a million visitors annually. The garden is 14 miles north of Victoria.
4. E. T. Mische, “The Loring Cascade,” Parks and Recreation (January 1918), p. 35. From early on, Charles Loring (1833-1922), as a major benefactor and as first head of the Park Board, enjoyed the title of “father” of the Minneapolis park system.
5. F. Scotti to R.P. Butchart, 28 February 1930 from The Butchart Gardens archive. Scotti’s authorship of Upper Fern Dell’s rocks has yet to be documented, but the components show all the earmarks of his later work.

Above: The rock garden/cascade, as viewed to the east from the lower terrace. Twin stairways are a classic Franco-Italian feature. This being L.A., Tarzan more than once flew over the LAPD cascade’s mid-section amphitheater with its banana plants, pines, and bamboo. Photo by the author, 2002.

7. Ibid.
The Landscape of Dodger Stadium

Steven Keylon

In the early 1960s, the booming metropolis of Los Angeles was transforming into a cosmopolitan “super city.” Massive redevelopment projects were reshaping the city not only culturally but also physically, as a handful of far-sighted citizens were literally moving mountains to attain extraordinary goals.

Invited by the City of Los Angeles to move his major league baseball team west, Brooklyn Dodgers owner Walter O’Malley met in May 1957 with City officials who flew him by helicopter over Chavez Ravine. O’Malley was captivated by the site, which was conveniently surrounded by freeways and in close proximity to the city center.

In September 1957, the City agreed to provide 300 acres of land in Chavez Ravine to O’Malley in exchange for his pledge to privately fund and build a 50,000-seat stadium on the site—a stadium that would make the Los Angeles Dodgers the first major-league team west of the Mississippi.

O’Malley began transforming a hilltop at Chavez Ravine into his dream of the “most modern baseball temple in the world,” envisioning a baseball stadium that would be a great civic asset—a tourist destination like Disneyland, the Farmer’s Market, Marineland of the Pacific, or Olvera Street. It was to be the first baseball stadium anywhere to be extensively landscaped. Of the project’s $23 million cost, O’Malley allocated $3 million to the landscaping alone in the first two seasons of operation.

Though it is commonly believed that the creation of Dodger Stadium erased a robust neighborhood, the Chavez Ravine site had been mostly cleared several years before it was shown to O’Malley. Once known as “a poor man’s Shangri-La,” Chavez Ravine had been home to generations of Mexican-American families—a thriving, tight-knit community where residents grew much of their own food and had established churches and schools. This rare example of bucolic country life just minutes from downtown was labeled a vacant shantytown and earmarked for redevelopment and an enormous public housing project. In July 1950 the City of L.A., using the power of eminent domain, sent the entire Chavez Ravine community letters notifying them that they would have to sell their homes. With federal funds from the Housing Act of 1949, the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) had hired architects Richard Neutra and Robert E. Alexander. They, in collaboration with landscape architect Garrett Eckbo, planned a massive and controversial public housing project called Elysian Park Heights. Chavez Ravine soon became a ghost town (the Los Angeles Fire Department even burned houses there for training purposes), and public support for the housing project dissipated. The City (continued)
Dodger Stadium (continued)

purchased the property from HACLA at a drastically reduced price, with the stipulation that the land be used for a public purpose.

Designing the Stadium

O’Malley recognized that transforming Chavez Ravine’s network of washes, gulches, and gullies into a sports arena would be difficult, as elevations ranged from 400 to 700 feet above sea level. He called on engineer-architect Captain Emil Praeger, who had designed Holman Stadium at O’Malley’s Dodgertown spring training facility in Florida. Senior partner of the New York City firm Praeger, Kavanagh and Waterbury, Captain Praeger had a reputation as an authority on bridges, foundations, and parkways.

Wanting to add a competent landscape architect to the design team at the earliest stage, Praeger consulted his partner of 30 years, landscape architect Gilmore D. Clarke, who recommended Glendale-based Arthur G. Barton (1907-1980). A 1929 graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, Barton spent his first few years in the field of landscape architecture working for California native plants specialist Theodore Payne. Opening his own office in 1940, Barton had an active practice designing residences, parks, public buildings, libraries, schools, and corporate campuses. A dynamic and respected member of the profession, Barton helped institute licensing for California landscape architects, which began in 1953 (Barton received license #362). Barton served several terms as President of the Southern California Chapter of ASLA, and was elected Vice-President of the National ASLA, serving two terms (1955-59).

To prepare the site, 8 million cubic yards of earth had to be moved to level the hillside. Cuts and fills up to 150 feet were shaped, and the hill graded with sculptured land forms contrasting with large flat areas required for extensive parking. To make the transition from freeway to parking lot to stadium a streamlined experience (essential in a car-centric city like Los Angeles), no traditional single main entrance or plaza was planned. Instead, many separate entrances were provided, all at-grade and easily accessible from parking lots on multiple terraced levels. This innovative feature eliminated the need for people to climb stairs or ramps, making entry and exit maximally efficient.

The design team developed a novel idea for the overall site plan, using the Seal of the City of Los Angeles as their inspiration. The shield within the seal would be represented by the stadium itself, while the rosary and border surrounding the seal would take the form of two roads at the circumference. For O’Malley, a devout Catholic, this solution also conveniently surrounded his stadium with a rosary for luck, each bead represented by a Dawn Redwood tree (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*). O’Malley called on the Brooklyn Botanic Garden to locate these rare specimens of one of the oldest trees in the world, and working with Max Watson, a noted arborist and eucalyptus specialist with a nursery in San Jose, California, obtained them from several sources. Enclosing all of this, a large circle of mature olive trees was to represent the outer ring of the City’s Seal.

**Implementing the Master Landscape Plan**

Barton developed a long-term master landscape plan for the site, with an incremental implementation strategy. With 120 acres of landscaped areas ultimately planned, the focus for the 1962 opening season was narrowed to planting the areas closest to the stadium. Working on the planting plan with Barton was his associate Jerrold Mitchell, a 1959 graduate of UC Berkeley, who explained that “our scope of work was from the perimeter circular road inward to the stadium,” as well as street trees, and planting areas at the outside areas of parking lots. For the remainder of the property, mostly banks and hillsides, large masses of groundcover (labileno clover, ivy geranium, low-spreading juniper, fig marigold, and eight different shades of flowering ice plant) provided temporary erosion control. These sculptured banks were enlivened with trees and specimen shrubs such as *Viburnum suspensum* and *V. japonicum*. The emphasis was on drought-tolerant and hardy species chosen, as Barton explained, “for effectiveness and beauty, but also to be maintenance free as possible.” Even so, 18 full-time maintenance men and gardeners would be required for ongoing care of the massive site.

Around the stadium, a “skyline” of 67 mature palm trees, 40 to 75 feet tall, was strategically placed to frame views of the city to the south and to be silhouetted against the distant San Gabriel Mountains to the north. Planted originally by early California settlers, these fine palm specimens, threatened by municipal street-widening plans, were saved from destruction by Barton: 40 trees came from Santa Monica, the remainder from the entrance road to Glendale pioneer L.C. Brand’s residence. Barton believed that “Dodger Stadium thereby becomes historical in preserving much of the early California typical of this area.”

While Barton may have favored a somewhat restrained palette, O’Malley’s vision of an arboreal world tour required more trees that were decorative or flowering. Barton searched for specimen trees with “artistic trunking or branching,” and planted the most fragrant where the fans could experience them. Special care was taken to ensure color in all seasons of the year with flowers, foliage, or berries. From Asia came evergreen Chinese elm, liquidambar, purple-leaf plum, evergreen flowering pear, as well as crape myrtle and orchid trees. Australia was represented by *Pittosporum undulatum* and three types of flowering eucalyptus. Brazilian pepper and jacaranda came from Brazil, akeek from South Africa, laurel from India, and carob from the Mediterranean. The United States offered various pines and the Arizona ash.

Barton confined high-maintenance flowering annuals to 149 raised concrete planters of varying heights and sizes. These whimsical planters, known as “champagne bowls” because of their distinctive shape, cascaded down the terraced hillsides. The bowls in parking areas were planted with petunias and other annuals in colors that matched the admission ticket, giving fans an easy way to find their parking lot. Inside the stadium, the colors of the seats, level by level, also corresponded to the ticket colors, with pastel yellow on the ground level, then orange, green and blue at the highest level. Praeger’s rationale was that the colors would go “from the land up to the sky.” Once seated, fans had a view of
a “red and green field,” the emerald green turf contrasting with “dirt” consisting of finely screened crushed red brick.  

**Opening Day**

Torrential rains in the months leading up to opening day delayed installation of the landscape, so Barton and his crews were still feverishly placing trees the day prior to the grand opening on April 10, 1962. Barton continued working through the season, planning Phase Two of the 5-year implementation plan. In early summer, 581 eucalyptus trees in 1-gallon cans were donated by eucalyptus specialist Max Watson. Twenty-seven different fast-growing species, many of them rare and flowering, were planned to screen unattractive views and to provide enclosure and a backdrop to the more decorative foreground plantings. Also donated were 400 Navajo willows, a gift from the ranch of Tom Bolack, owner of the Albuquerque Dukes minor-league baseball team.  

Though partly unavoidable because of weather delays in the spring, O’Malley grew impatient with what he perceived as Barton’s somewhat slow progress. O’Malley intended to spend an additional $1.5 million in 1963, packing 5 years’ worth of planned projects into the single season. However, after submitting his final updated plans for Phase Two, Barton was fired by O’Malley in early August 1962.  

**Landscaping for the 1963 Season**

On November 8, 1962, O’Malley invited landscape designer John T. Ratekin to be the new landscape consultant for the balance of 1962 continuing through 1964. Initially, Ratekin worked to finish the irrigation work and to plant the nearly one thousand trees that Barton had ordered. With the basic architecture of the landscape now established, Ratekin’s ongoing contributions were mainly decorative. Inside the stadium at the rear outfield (and protected from baseballs by wire mesh, invisible from the stands), Ratekin installed half-moon shaped beds of red, white and blue petunias—the “Dodger colors.” He also placed large tubs of flowering hibiscus in the great halls and alleys of the interior of the stadium. To ensure fans experienced all of this beauty at night games, Ratekin proposed lighting the flowering color “to give the maximum visual soft glow color effect to the entire premises outside the stadium” before and after games. He added 56 clumps of *Strelicia nicolai* (giant bird of paradise), 300 (continued)
clumps of the smaller \textit{S. reginae}, as well as many other large-leaved and showy tropical plants to the terraced hillsides in the parking areas.\textsuperscript{13}

O’Malley and Ratekin’s most significant collaboration, however, was the beautification of the hills of Elysian Park, the stadium’s palm-silhouetted and picturesque backdrop. Ratekin had the hills, still scarred from the excavation work of construction, cleared of weeds and tilled, and a network of 32 miles of irrigation and sprinklers installed. Wildflower “bullets,” each one containing seeds, fertilizer and hormones, were shot from special guns, covering one hillside with golden California poppies. The other hills became a solid sea of blue and purple lupin, Indian paintbrush, cockscomb, and other native California wildflowers.\textsuperscript{14}

**Enduring Image of Los Angeles**

The soaring architecture of Dodger Stadium “helped popularize a particularly evocative image of Los Angeles, one filled with palm trees and sunshine and charismatic contemporary design.”\textsuperscript{15} Much of the beauty of the stadium came from its vast and thoughtfully designed landscape. O’Malley’s ambitious dream was realized, and the stadium recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. As part of a recent refreshing of the landscape, Mia Lehrer and Associates acknowledged the O’Malley heritage by restoring the blue and white petunias to the outfield.\textsuperscript{16}

**Note**

The author wishes to thank Peter O’Malley, Brent Shyer, and Robert Schweppe of the Walter O’Malley archives.

**Endnotes**

WOM = Walter O’Malley archives


4. “Agenda and Notes for Meeting with Walter O’Malley, August 29, 1962.” WOM

5. “After Many a Summer: The Passing of the Giants and Dodgers and a Golden Age in New York Baseball,” Robert Murphy, Sterling Publishing, 2009; also an email from landscape architect Jerrold Mitchell, August 21, 2013. Gilmore D. Clarke was President of the National ASLA from 1949-51, and presumably met Barton during the first West Coast National meeting of the ASLA in Ojai in 1950. Barton served as Vice-President of the National ASLA from 1955-59.

6. After working a few years for native plants specialist Theodore Payne, Barton survived the remainder of the Great Depression working for the National Park Service at the San Francisco Regional office, and later with the Los Angeles County Parks Department as Assistant Superintendent of Parks.


10. Email to author from Jerrold Mitchell, August 12, 2013. Mitchell was an associate with Arthur Barton & Associates from 1959-65, and in addition to Dodger Stadium, he designed the landscapes for East Los Angeles College, Pacific Palisades High School, Pasadena High School, and the TRW corporate campus in Canoga Park.


17. John T. Ratekin (1914-1992). It is unknown where (or if) Ratekin studied landscape architecture. A member of the AILA, Ratekin, who had done the landscapes for several shopping centers in Southern California, had recently been the landscape architect at Hollywood Park racetrack, designing the seasonal flower displays. Walter and Kay O’Malley, who were good friends of Mervyn LeRoy, loved the landscape at Hollywood Park, so LeRoy might have introduced Ratekin to the O’Malley’s. Email from Peter O’Malley to the author, February 21, 2014.


20. Ibid.


24. Ibid.


There was a lot of energy in the room on a very rainy Saturday at Descanso Gardens when Melissa Pregill of Cipher led the CGLHS board of directors in an all-day planning session to develop a vision and set goals and objectives. Joining us were past president Thea Gurns, past treasurer John Blocker, past membership secretary Libby Simon, and Eden contributor and editorial board member Steven Keylon.

We aim for a thriving organization of informed people interested in sharing and expanding knowledge and appreciation of California’s garden and landscape history. We want to promote wider awareness of current and future restoration and preservation issues through Eden, our website, our annual conference, tours and talks, and social media. Our goals for 2014 are to increase and diversify our membership, work toward financial sustainability, and raise our profile. We ended the planning session by establishing committees focused on achieving these goals. The day ended with a fascinating overview of the history of Descanso Gardens by its executive director, David Brown.

Judy M. Horton, President, CGLHS, president@cglhs.org

Above - Front row, left to right: Phoebe Cutler, Kelly Comras, Judy Horton, Nancy Carter, Virginia Kean, and Thea Gurns; Back row, left to right: Larkin Owens, John Blocker, Steven Keylon, Christy O’Hara, Carolyn Bennett, Ann Scheid, Melissa Pregill, and David Brown.
Please join the California Garden and Landscape History Society in Santa Barbara for our 2014 Conference. We will be celebrating Lockwood de Forest Jr. (1896-1949), an innovative and influential landscape architect, and his remarkable family—his wife and partner, Elizabeth Kellam de Forest, and his father, Lockwood de Forest II (1850-1932), a masterful landscape painter and decorator.

The three-day conference will include

- A symposium led by keynote speaker David Streatfield—noted California landscape historian and Lockwood de Forest scholar
- Lectures and a special talk by landscape architect Sydney Baumgartner, Elizabeth de Forest’s "niece" and protégé
- Cocktail reception and welcome
- Tours of rarely seen private gardens, including contemporary gardens that continue the de Forest legacy of regionally appropriate design
- Self-guided walking tour of downtown Santa Barbara with de Forest highlights

For more information and to register, please visit our website: www.cglhs.org

Left: Lockwood de Forest in Buffalo car, c. 1933. Photo courtesy of Kellam de Forest.