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General

Landmark Award

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Vista Hermosa Natural Park
Studio-MLA, *Los Angeles*

By Mimi Zeiger

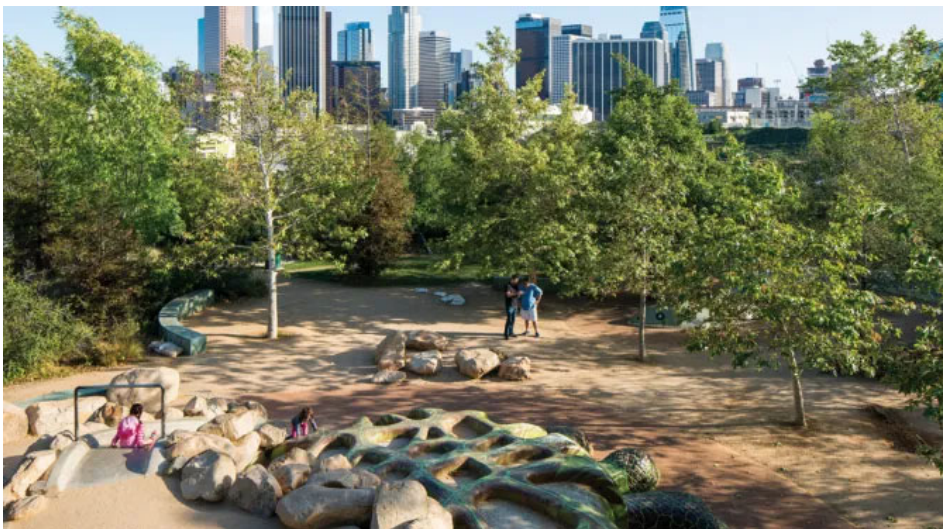
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At the turn of the last century, the 10 acres on which Vista Hermosa Natural Park sits was a forest of oil derricks. Located on the outskirts of a nascent downtown Los Angeles, dozens of wellheads replaced the native sage and chaparral scrub. A photograph from 1901 shows a poisonous landscape glistening with pools of what might be water—or oil.

Fast-forward a century and the land was still a toxic mess. Working-class homes (built decades after drilling) were bulldozed to make way for the Belmont Learning Complex. A project of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the \$200 million middle school campus and housing complex was once deemed “the most expensive school in America” and was meant to bring high-tech learning to the city’s Temple-Beaudry neighborhood. But by 2000, construction had halted, and the planned complex was enmeshed in political scandal that bubbled up to mainstream news outlets.

The Nation described the site as “a half-built peach-and-beige-colored brick building towering over hills of dirt, wild mustard, scattered trash, and tumbleweed.” Under that urban bricolage lurked dangers left behind by oil speculation: methane gas, hydrogen sulfide, benzene, patches of crude. Deeper still, a fault line.



Vista Hermosa Natural Park. Photo by Hunter Kerhart.

Conditions were mostly unchanged when Studio-MLA and KPFF Consulting Engineers embarked on the design for Vista Hermosa Natural Park a few years later—a sloped site tucked between arteries leading toward Bunker Hill skyscrapers downtown and a low-income, primarily Latinx neighborhood. Developed for a partnership of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the City of Los Angeles, and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, the firm’s brief was to transform this difficult and neglected piece of land into a green space for the community—a task that would require mending ecological and societal wounds.

When Vista Hermosa opened in 2008, it was the first new public park in Downtown Los Angeles since 1895. Today, what was brownfield is now urban habitat. More than 600 trees—coastal live

oaks, white alders, and California sycamores—shade terraces cut into the hillside. There are birthday parties and picnics, dog walkers and sunbathers. The lawn offers more than a titular “beautiful view” of downtown; it doubles as a catch basin for rainwater retention. The sound of kids’ feet crunches on winding, decomposed gravel paths, edges softened by shaggy stands of feather grass and sage scrub.

It’s rare in Los Angeles to find a spot that is both city and a bit wild. There’s the cliché of manicured backyards on one end of the spectrum and the grand, puma-populated expanse of Griffith Park and the Santa Monica Mountains on the other. Vista Hermosa sits in the middle: an inter-species playground. In 2016, the park was the subject of a Landscape Architecture Foundation Case Study Investigation, which identified 60 bird species and a litter of coyote pups.

The study’s data, however, best highlights the ways that recreational spaces produce social equity. Vista Hermosa serves some 21,000 people in the dense, park-poor surrounding neighborhoods, where, at the time the case study was undertaken, the median household income was under \$44,000.



Vista Hermosa Natural Park. *Photo by Tom Lamb.*

Years earlier, during the design development, Mia Lehrer, FASLA, and her team conducted extensive research and held workshops with residents. They asked local children to draw pictures of what they wanted to see in a park and collected crayon drawings of green trees, rainbows, and swing sets. Those images would later manifest into a play area where kids can scramble over sculptural snake and turtle structures near the top of the park and on the middle terrace, where a grotto amphitheater with a stream edged with boulders and irises is used for English and Spanish public programming (an average of 67 programs per year, according to the case study findings). An artificial turf soccer field on the lower level adjacent to the parking lot is the most formal of the park’s program elements, and it is incredibly well-used. The 2016 report showed that the field serves 1,500 to 2,000 athletes per week.

And what of the toxic landscape underneath? It is there, a reminder of the city's extractive history, but it is controlled and hidden. Studio-MLA worked with SCS Engineers to allay the continued environmental impact of the oil fields. Contaminated topsoil was removed, and new layers of fresh soil added. A venting system was installed to prevent the buildup of gases around park buildings and other hard infrastructures.

In 2011, *Curbed* asked Lehrer to predict what Los Angeles's green spaces would look like in 20 years. "[They'll be] rich in biodiversity and people—after years spent in private backyards, Angelenos are finally coming together in public spaces—taking ownership and enjoying social interaction," she replied. Just over a decade later—a pandemic and drought in between—her vision couldn't be more prescient. It took more than 100 years for Vista Hermosa to become a park, and now it points the way toward the future.

Client: Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, Los Angeles Unified School District