

Echo Park Lake Rehabilitation Project

Los Angeles, CA

Purpose of Project

Echo Park Lake is one of the City of Los Angeles' crown jewels and a designated cultural-historic landmark. Originally built as a water supply reservoir in 1870, Echo Park Lake was formally established as a city park in 1892. The 29-acre park, however, suffered from decades of neglect and in 2006 it was identified on the California 303(d) list of impaired water bodies. The Echo Park Lake Rehabilitation Project, begun in 2007 as part of the City of Los Angeles' Proposition O Clean Water Bond Program, sought to improve water quality, habitat, and recreational opportunities. The project consisted of relocating wildlife, draining the lake, removing contaminated sediments, replacing the liner and lake edging, re-configuring storm drain inlets, restoring the lotus beds, implementing stormwater treatment wetlands, enhancing wildlife habitat, implementing parkland BMPs, developing interpretive signage, preserving the park's cultural resources, and improving park and in-lake recreational uses. A rehabilitated Echo Park Lake opened in June 2013 to rave reviews in blogs, newspapers, and other local publications.

Role of Landscape Architect

While the sequence of outreach, analysis, environmental review, design, and construction extended more than six years, one thing became clear early on in the process: it would be the landscape architect's responsibility to bring together seemingly disparate project goals. Functional infrastructure improvements would need to be balanced with the park's historical legacy, recreational needs, habitat, safety, maintenance, sustainability, and culture. This was not an easy task, as the list of public agencies and stakeholders involved in the project was extensive: City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation & Parks, Bureau of Engineering, Bureau of Sanitation, Department of Cultural Affairs, Office of Historic Resources, Council District 13, California Department of Fish & Wildlife, Army Corps of Engineers, State Historic Preservation Office, the Audubon Society, Heal the Bay, and neighborhood organizations and residents. Communication was key to successfully navigating these stakeholder groups, and the Landscape Architect worked to bring the right people to the table at the right time—whether consultants, public agency leaders, or concerned residents who, in many cases, had decades of intimate knowledge about Echo Park Lake. What emerged was a design that was both cohesive and satisfying to the many stakeholders.

Significance

Despite its degraded physical state, it was blatantly clear from the project's inception that both community residents and civic leaders had an emotional connection to Echo Park Lake. Initially, there was concern from the public that "their jewel" would be altered for the worse—that it would lose the charm and grace that made it so special to them. The design team worked hard to identify the characteristics that made it special, and then to ensure that despite massive construction impacts, the public would not only recognize—but embrace—the rehabilitated park. After being fenced off for more than 18 months, Echo Park Lake has once again come to serve as the center of the neighborhood's vibrant identity, attracting a broader user group than ever before and truly highlighting the value of great public spaces. The annual Lotus Festival returned to the park in July 2014, capping the rehabilitation project's accomplishments.

Special Factors

Initially conceived as an urban engineering project, the design process actually generated a unique array of landscape-centric challenges: the need for a sustainable landscape scheme that reduced excessive storm water pollutants in the park's lake; a procedure for restoring and relocating the site's delicate historic outdoor statue; a plan for relocating the park's long-term wildlife residents; an approach to managing the more than 400 trees on the site (some designed Heritage Trees); a plan to ensure the long-term success of the once-depleted lotus population; the need for cultural landscape preservation that was sensitive to the tangible and intangible heritage of the surrounding diverse community; and insertions that respected the past while looking forward (such as a lighting scheme evocative of the park's early globe lights while meeting today's efficiency standards and durability requirements).

Through a deliberate and collaborative design process, the Echo Park Lake Rehabilitation Project has resulted in not only the engineering overhaul of the lake, but also the cultural and recreational rebirth of the park.