







Like so much of Los Angeles' history, looking backwards is necessary to appreciate its meteoric rise over the past 200 years. Decade and after decade, the city has shapeshifted—in population, cultural influence, and daily life. Or has it? Recently, RELM learned that the father of landscape architecture, Fredrick Law Olmsted (FLO), wrote a plan for Los Angeles in 1924. This is the same man who gave us Central Park and designed the park systems in Boston, Seattle, and Kansas City. Then, a few years later, his sons, the Olmsted Brothers, followed up with their own plan for the region in 1930. Why isn't either plan widely known (within and outside the discipline)? And more importantly, why isn't LA's park system regarded with the same stature as those in other Olmsted-designed cities?

Answers, we found, were a mixture of shock and awe. Did LA even have a shot of being a walkable city 100 years ago, much less now? Was accessible open space accounted for in LA's city planning? What is the history of LA's park system? RELM's Hana Georg, Landscape Architect, and Valorie Born, Director of Strategic Communications, led a research initiative to learn how the hand of the almighty Olmsted family was or was not implemented. The following interaction is part of an ongoing studio dialogue looking to understand how Olmsted Senior's 1924 Major Traffic Street Plan and Olmsted Juniors' 1930 Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region inform LA's modern open space network.





**Valorie Born (VB)**

Hana, I have so much say, but feel we need to summarize the intent and findings of each report first. Both left me asking about the inevitability of Los Angeles. Were we destined to be an auto-centric city? Do our mountains and beaches make up for local parks? What role does civic vision play in realizing great cities? I couldn't help but compare both reports to how I view current day Los Angeles.

**Hana Georg (HG)**

Inevitability is the perfect word. I also had to sit with these reports and try to extrapolate then from now thoughtfully. It is so easy to lose perspective on the past and make sweeping judgments about how things could have gone differently, and these reports are a revealing snapshot from a historic moment in LA's urban planning. Let's set the stage:

In the early 20th century, Los Angeles was exploding. Between 1910 and 1930, the city's population increased 4-fold, from 319,198 to 1,238,048 (LA Almanac), and its land area ballooned. We learned from the 1924 report that LA had already reached the largest percentage of automobile ownership in the world, "one automobile for each two and nine-tenths (2.9) persons" due largely to "a uniformly mild climate [that] encourages constant use of cars every day of the year." [1] Olmsted Senior, hired by the Traffic Commission of The City and County of Los Angeles to solve LA's car problem, aptly noted, "It is a small wonder that a street congestion problem of great magnitude results." [2] The substance of this report goes on to propose a hierarchy of street types to improve traffic flow into and out of the region, concentrated on the downtown area.

**A properly coordinated city plan must provide a street system related to street railways, rapid transit, railroads, flood protection and drainage, schools, playgrounds, and parks, and these have been taken into account as far as possible in the time and with the limited resources at the Board's command. <sup>3</sup>**

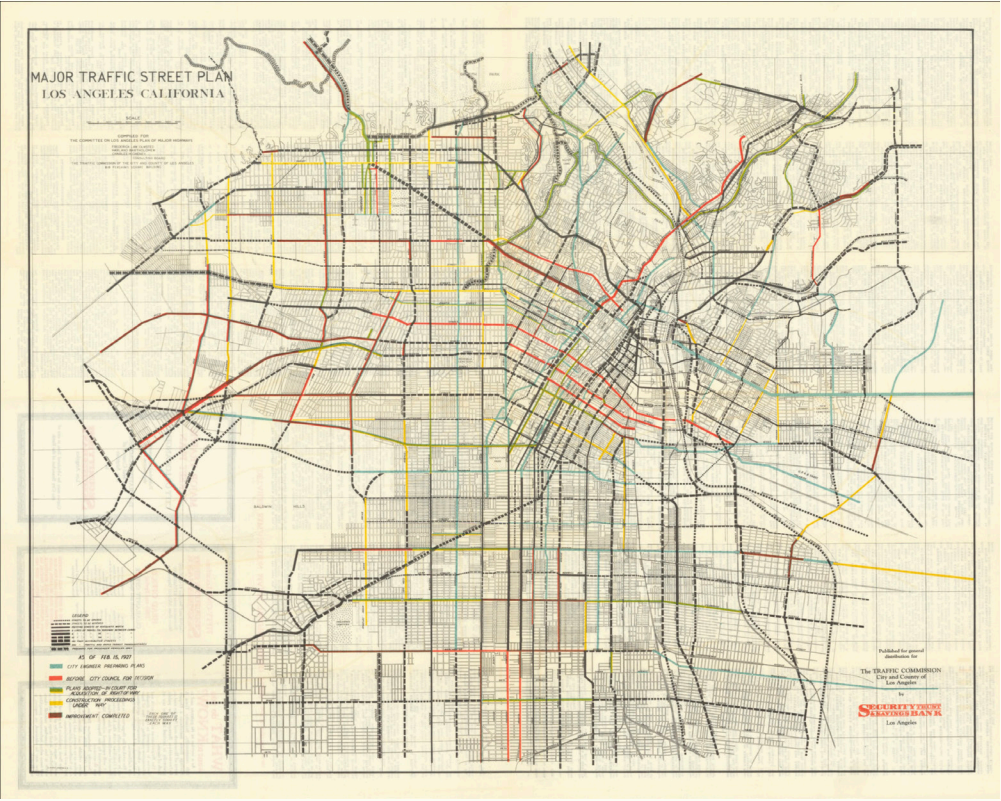


Los Angeles 1914-1915: Staley Image 18. Library of Congress | Looking South on Broadway



Comparatively, the Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region 1930 report was commissioned by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. Written by the Olmsted Brothers and Harland Bartholomew & Associates, it presents an open space strategy for the metropolitan region, substantially more encompassing than Olmsted Senior's plan and worth noting, more urgent in their recommendation to take deliberate and holistic action. In their summary of conclusion, Olmsted + Bartholomew write:

**Continued prosperity will depend on providing needed parks, because, with the growth of a great metropolis here, the absence of parks will make living conditions less and less attractive, less and less wholesome, though parks have been easily dispensed with under the conditions of the past. In so far, therefore, as the people fail to show the understanding, courage, and organizing ability necessary at this crisis, the growth of the Region will tend to strangle itself. <sup>4</sup>**



Map of Olmsted Senior's 1924 Major Traffic Street Plan

The report lays out a framework for parks, playgrounds, and beaches and explains how to fund and govern a system of this scale. It is well ahead of its time! They lay out incremental tax financing, for instance. However, for all its genius, the report was curiously quieted upon release, and thus, the reason most practitioners are not aware of its existence. It is speculated that Olmsted + Bartholomew overreached in their plan, which would have disrupted the balance of power in the City. Regardless of why the report was promptly sidelined, the analysis of open space remains relevant, and what it reveals about LA is fascinating.

VB

Nice summary, Hana. I am curious what struck you the most about both reports?

HG

The most striking thing to me is the difference in tone between the two texts. The 1924 Street Plan is very calculated and scientific, largely reflecting the aims and expectations of the government agency which commissioned it. You can feel that it is reigned in. The 1930 Report, on the other hand, is unbound by this rigid format. Possibly because the 1930 Report was commissioned by an ad hoc citizens committee loosely overseen by the Chamber of Commerce, it does not pander to the same bureaucratic rigidity that bore the 1924 Plan.

Despite the differing frameworks, I did feel a direct relationship between each text and understand them to be a part of the same conversation.

One of the most interesting moments to me in the 1924 Street Plan, was the brief recognition that street capacity, despite being a central planning concern, is no cure-all for pervasive traffic congestion. Anyone living in LA for an extended time has seen the City repeatedly spend huge sums of money to expand the lanes on roads and highways, all in the name of combating congestion. Time and time again that extra capacity is almost immediately eaten up by extra car density and congestion is not alleviated. Olmsted Senior cautions,

**If not previously limited by other factors, the amount of traffic will be limited by the width or capacity of the streets, and by that only. If that capacity is doubled, the limit will be raised, but when it is again reached, the final degree of congestion will be just as bad as with a smaller limit capacity. <sup>5</sup>**



The 1930 Report further unpacks this reality, suggesting that LA's problematic relationship to street congestion runs deeper than the organization and improvement of roads. It's behavioral. The physical landscape has enabled urban sprawl and, with it, an expectation for the single-family home. "Los Angeles may continue to grow as a metropolis of automobile users, living pleasantly in detached houses with plenty of room... but only if it provides motorways on a truly modern scale undreamed of in the past."<sup>6</sup> The moderate climate has introduced Angelenos to unlimited outdoor beauty and, with it, a desire to hit the road. "The most conspicuous effect of climate and scenery is to increase very greatly the use of the automobile for recreation."<sup>7</sup> They identify a set of conditions that have led to a new urban lifestyle, engendered by a love of car culture, which becomes embedded as a societal value.

VB

Were you as shocked as I was that cars were normative 100 years ago? I wasn't expecting that, at all. Maps of 1920 LA look similar to what it looks like today – so much of the road infrastructure was in place then. And yet, I still found Olmsted Senior's and Junior's embrace of the automobile incredulous given the opening remarks in the 1930 report:

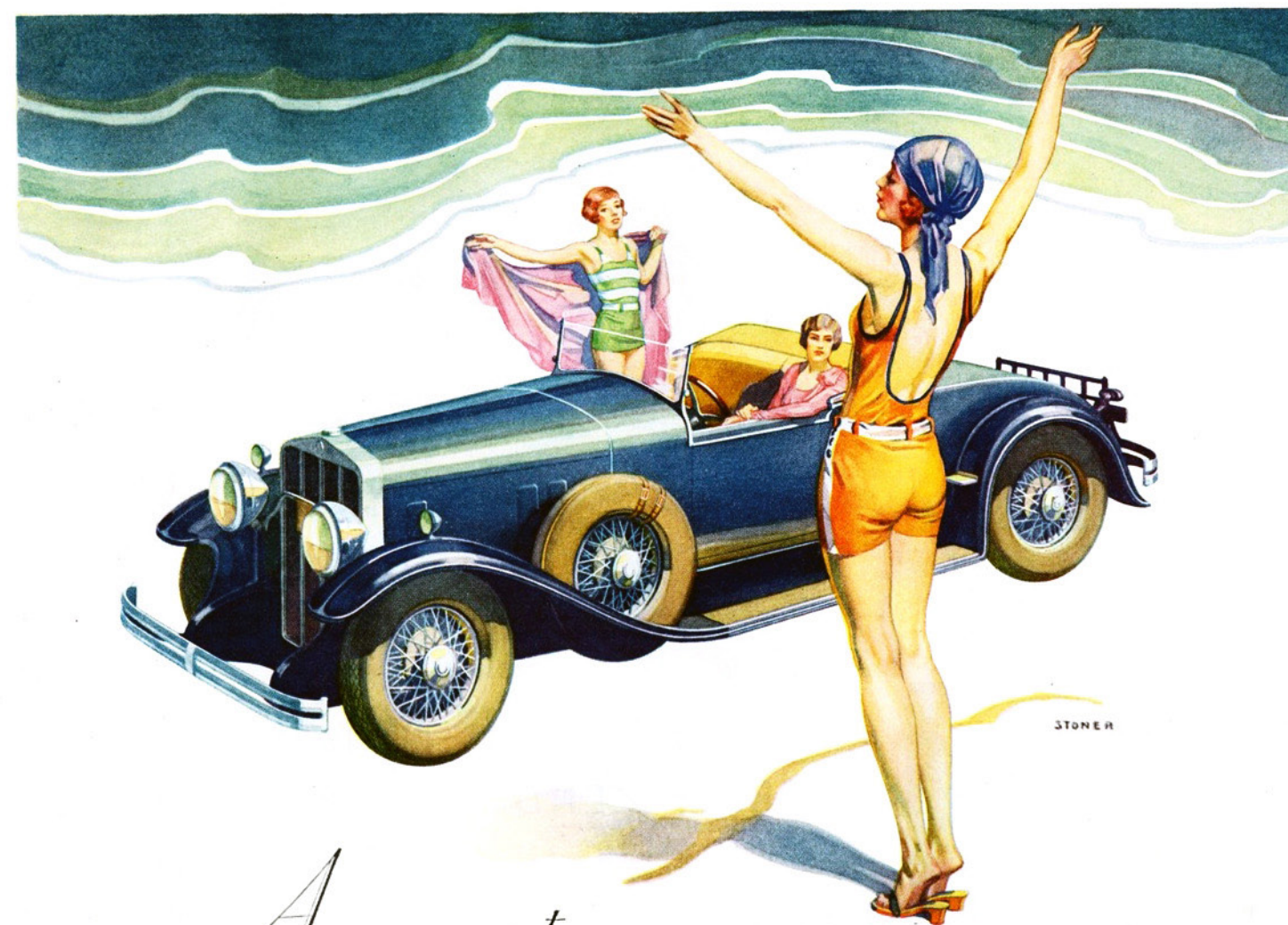
**The situation revealed by this report is so disquieting as to make it highly expedient to impress upon the public as**

**soon as possible the present crisis in the welfare of Los Angeles and the surrounding region. It shows that the park question is closely related to the community's health.<sup>8</sup>**

I was expecting to see the insertion of open space at all scales but after reading the 200-page report cover to cover I was left asking 'where are the parks?' The thrust of Olmsted + Bartholomew's argument is for regional recreation (beaches, mountains, canyons, and athletic fields) and pleasure parkways, vehicular thoroughfares 'a quarter mile or more in width, screened from the surroundings, and planted to produce a sense of spaciousness and seclusion as well as scenic effect.'<sup>9</sup> Olmsted + Bartholomew write:

**Experience elsewhere points clearly to one of the most urgent park needs of the Los Angeles Region—the need for a system of interconnected pleasureway parks, regional in scope...in order to provide for travel amid pleasant surroundings.<sup>10</sup>**

Absent were the connected park systems I find emblematic of the Olmsted's. For instance, they overlayed Boston's Emerald Necklace on a map of regional Los Angeles. The juxtaposition of parks versus pleasure parkways left me speechless. I felt a more accurate title of the report should read Cars, Playgrounds, and Beaches.



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and as modern  
as  
youth itself*

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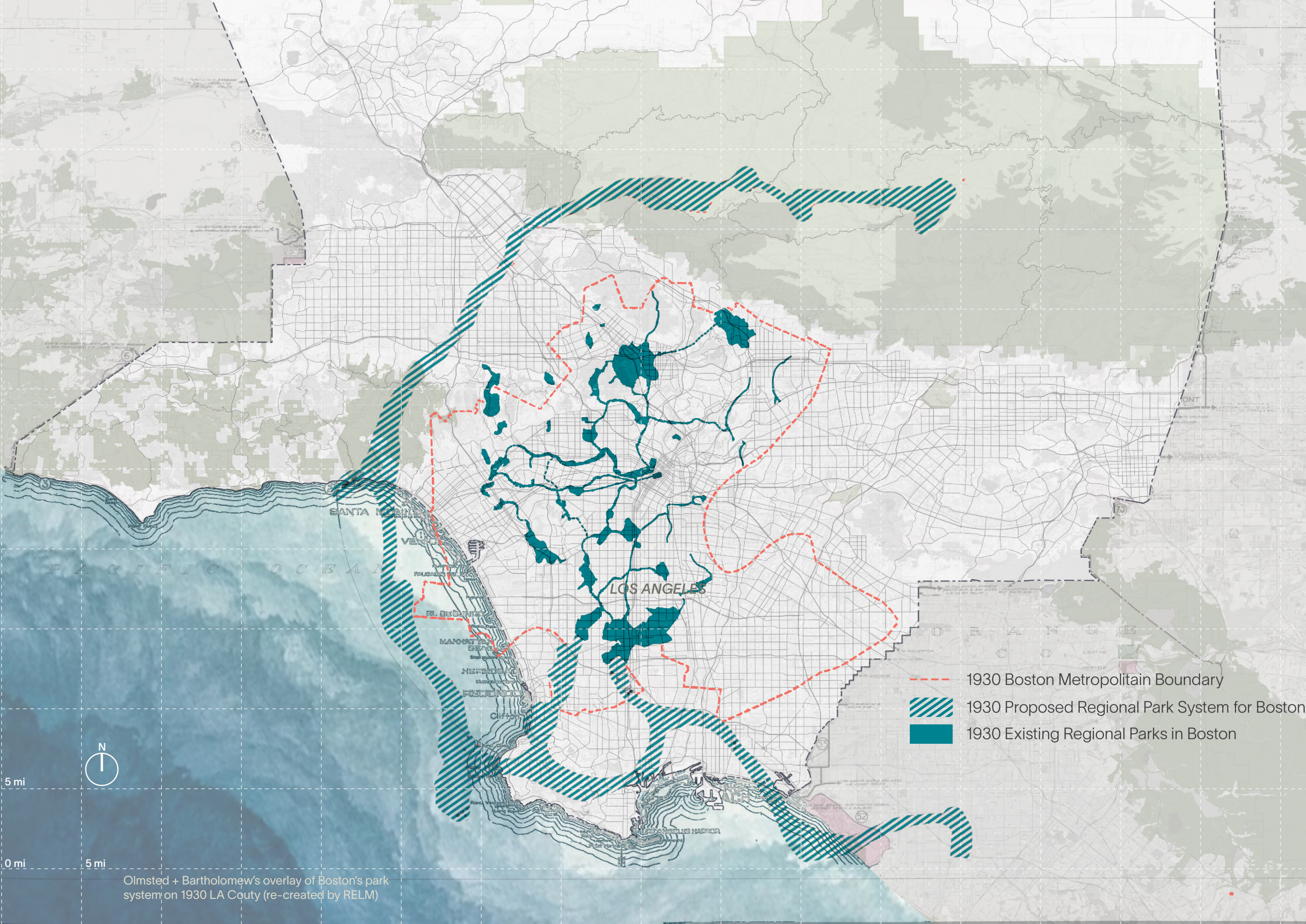
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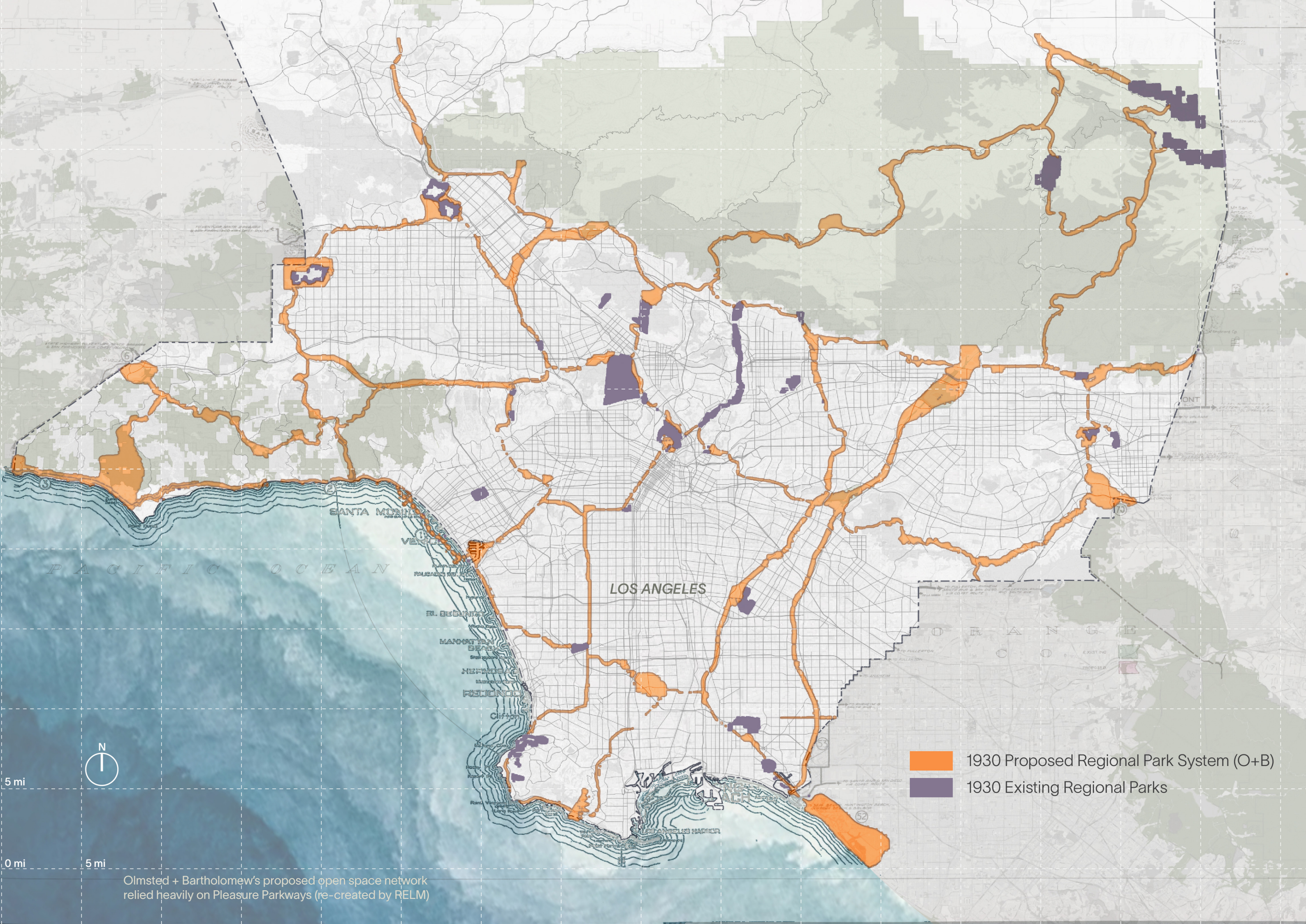




- 1930 Boston Metropolitan Boundary
- ▨ 1930 Proposed Regional Park System for Boston
- 1930 Existing Regional Parks in Boston

Olmsted + Bartholomew's overlay of Boston's park system on 1930 LA County (re-created by RELM)





- 1930 Proposed Regional Park System (O+B)
- 1930 Existing Regional Parks

Olmsted + Bartholomew's proposed open space network relied heavily on Pleasure Parkways (re-created by RELM)



## HG

For me the 1930 report met all expectations for a landscape forward planning document. Parks are present throughout. There is a beautiful line in which the authors explore the nuanced and dynamic nature of the urban park.

**One of the most important purposes of a park, and yet one of the most difficult to describe, is that of providing the peculiarly refreshing quality which has such a restful and beneficent effect on the nervous system. This is a subtle and complex thing, which brings, along with a sense of beauty, a sense of spaciousness, of freedom, and of contrast with urban conditions.** <sup>11</sup>

I can see how this vision for a park becomes overshadowed as they begin to conflate the 'local park' with its more institutional counterpart, the 'schoolyard.' Reading further, though, this association appeared to be rooted in an interesting observation about how cities function. They say "public schools, with their playgrounds are probably the most equitably distributed institutions we have" and that this distribution "has come about through a systematic, unremitting, and largely successful effort to locate the schools at

points accessible from the homes of all the children." [12] It's a powerful juxtaposition that hints at a truly aspirational vision for local parks, widely accessible and highly valued. A vital urban asset.

It could be argued that Olmsted + Bartholomew were settling or missing the mark by implying that schoolyards could double as parks and recreation hubs, but I could also imagine them picking their battles strategically. At the local level, they saw a viable existing network of open space that, while imperfect, could serve the community, and at the regional level, they saw little to none. It didn't surprise me that they gave so much emphasis to the region

I was delighted by their approach to the region and found their lengthy analysis and remedies for regional open space to be unexpectedly holistic. They frame real parks and their connective armature (parkways) as inseparable features, blurring the lines between pedestrian and vehicular infrastructure. It is profound that the criteria for a parkway was a strip of land "no less than a quarter mile wide," more than enough space for parks and recreation to be embedded, dominant even. Boston's Emerald Necklace, an iconic Olmsted project, is the only regional park system I can immediately call to mind that exhibits similar presence and dimension. Olmsted + Bartholomew's parks vision for the LA region was ambitious.

## VB

But the local didn't happen in mass. Our school yards are not uniformly green, and there is little to no reference of pedestrian activity. I understand the premise of schoolyards being properly sited within neighborhoods, but why are Boston (and other cities) so different from a planning perspective? I assume, in part, it is because of Los Angeles' scale and climate. That said—and however wide—Pleasure Parkways are still intended to be driven Hana, not walked. I was expecting the pedestrian to feature more prominently; instead, cars reign supreme. And maybe there was no other way by the 1930s. Car ownership was so pervasive and has never diminished. Both reports take into account the cost of automobile ownership and describe driving as a valued form of recreation. Angelenos derived pleasure from driving and happily paid for it.

**Today, almost everybody can, and frequently does without hesitation, get into a car and go five or ten miles through uninteresting streets to get to what he considers a really pleasant route of pleasure travel, perhaps in a park or urban forest, but more likely just to a region that isn't yet all built up...All of this is more true in the Los Angeles Region than of any other great metropolis. The people here can and do get an immense amount of outdoor recreation in just this manner, and voluntarily spend an amount of time and money in getting it (in car-mile cost, for example) which gives a rough indication of what they find worth it.** <sup>13</sup>

This is the inevitability I was referring to in our opening remarks. The city came of age with the automobile. I didn't realize this prior and as I read each report, I saw no inclination to alter this behavior. The Olmsteds and city officials alike, embraced the technology. Laurie Olin, a distinguished landscape architect, notes in an interview about the 1930 report,

**It's heartbreaking...when you consider the irony of how these planners had such a romantic vision of and love for the automobile that they coupled with a proposal for gracious scenic auto routes, a system of parkways that would bind the whole of the region together...You can hear that they liked to drive around Los Angeles as it was then.** <sup>14</sup>



HG

I don't feel troubled the way you do by the authors' adoption of car culture. Like many Angelenos, I feel constantly perturbed by traffic in the city, though I don't resent the car completely. My own experience growing up in LA includes long drives as a form of recreation or decompressing. I was keenly aware of this long before discovering the world of planning and design, because living in Brooklyn later, I actively missed this relationship with my car. I hadn't really reflected on that until now, but there is something alluring and even satiating about driving through the LA landscape. I get it.

That being said, I also love walking, and I am constantly faced with the reality that the car and the pedestrian do not coexist well in LA. It's astounding that even by 1920, we were struggling to mediate our pedestrian-scale neighborhoods with car infrastructure tying them all together. The urgency of this predicament a century ago, which rang clearly through both reports, was surprising to me, partly because it feels eerily familiar to the urgency I feel throughout our profession now.

Reading through these reports has been enlightening and has helped me build the world of 1920's LA more substantially in my imagination. It is easy to look back and critique the assumed oversights and gaps in knowledge or thinking, but curiosity is a much more interesting project, and I am trying to move away from reactive cynicism to make space for more empathy. In this spirit, I can imagine a world where the

great attention given to regional spaces is strategic. According to the report, the quantity of park space at both scales was hugely lacking, and the financial challenges were similar as well, namely land acquisition and sustained park funding. One key difference between local and regional park space from a planning perspective is complexity. A regional project inherently involves a larger set of stakeholders, agencies and contractors, so why not focus on the more ambitious goal that will carry the smaller wins along with it? I could imagine an argument in which a city that can get a large regional park system built, is a city that could also produce and maintain a robust network of neighborhood parks

VB

It's funny because I feel LA has and continues to do a much better job at the regional than the local. I wish the larger also carried the smaller but perhaps that's where we are today, infilling the local with parks/right of ways/public plazas.

What did resonate with me in the 1930 report was how their analysis and mapping illustrated an expansive public realm punctuated with natural features. To me, Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches is a spatial analysis of moving through the city. Olmsted + Bartholomew accepted the region's scale, the desire to travel far distances (for work and pleasure) and sought to make infrastructure of all categories pleasing. Laurie Olin, in the same passage as above, goes on to say,



Illustration of special-purpose motorway buildings in a business district from the Automobile Club of Southern California's Traffic Survey, 1937. Image courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive

**...they combine [pleasure parkways] with proposals to preserve floodways as a way to lower the social cost of flood damage to society. Put the two together and you get a dream of easy, leisurely movement through a spacious, generous realm of natural features. There is a vision of touring through a landscape paradise implied in this report that, of course, was a mirage that kept receding from us all as we tried to approach it.** <sup>15</sup>



HG

That's on point Val! The 1930 report is, at its best, a textured analysis of moving through the city. The authors' ability to identify complex spatial relationships and leverage them towards smart planning goals is heroic. Even more so that they refuse to exclude the day-to-day lived experience of the resulting infrastructure from their recommendations.

VB

The next item concerning Olmsted + Bartholomew's report I found curious was the distinction between parks and recreation. At times, they use these words discreetly but, more often, interchangeably. I never critically thought about this relationship, so I googled it. Here in LA, our first parks were around drinking reservoirs. Our Department

HG

Before I answer that question directly, I think it's worth re-iterating two key points Olmsted + Bartholomew stated repeatedly in their report. First, "The Los Angeles Region is the only great metropolis that has developed almost wholly since the invention of the automobile" and that you can't compare LA to other cities. [16] Industry, geography, topography and natural assets make for different strategy to cities elsewhere.

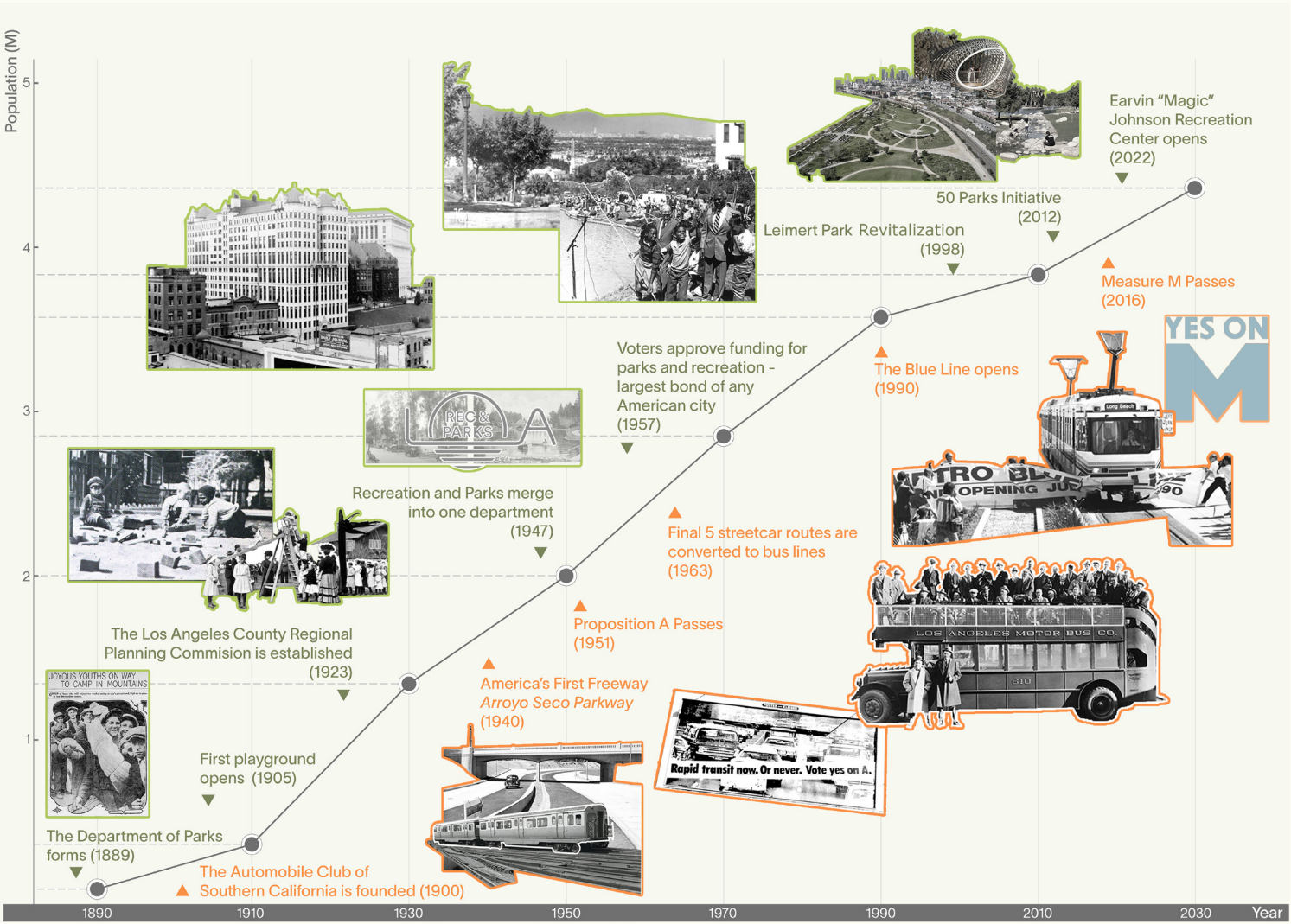
When the report was issued, the existing park facilities at every scale were limited in scope and irregularly distributed. The total area was "not only below the standards of other cities, but below any reasonable minimum, either on an acreage or population basis." [17] This image of deficiency clearly stuck in the collective imagination, and here we are a hundred years later, steadfast subscribers to this mentality, LA as park poor.

I bought in as well, but I softened a lot doing this research, especially because of our conversations. As I became more curious about LA's relationship to parks and recreation, the underlying assumptions that support the above premise began to erode, and the open space landscape of Los Angeles became a much more nuanced thing. Some areas are flush with parks and opportunities for recreation. Some areas are truly missing these resources, and the effects are harmful. It is not helpful to generalize the problem because such overarching arguments produce generalized solutions,

of Parks was formed in 1889 followed by the 1904 Department Playground Commission—the first in the country—which also was the precursor to the Recreation Department. In 1925, the city formalized the three purviews into two departments: a Department of Parks and a Department of Playground and Recreation. Los Angeles' present-day Department of Recreation and Parks was formed in 1947, overseeing parks, public golf courses, indoor gymnasiums, ball fields, family camps, and public beaches. Recreation is the key underpinning to all these types of activities.

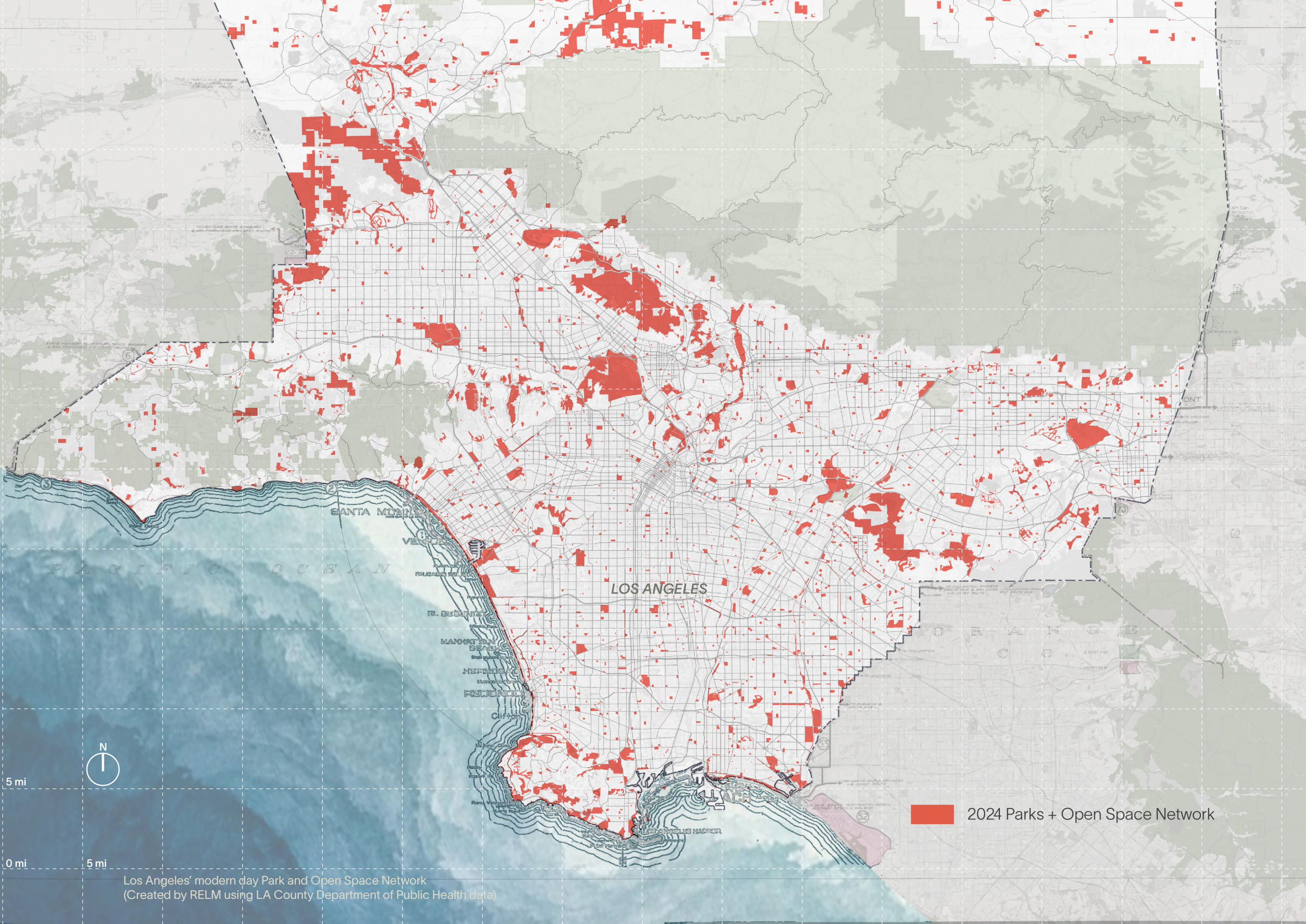
And that's where I began to appreciate Olmsted + Bartholomew's emphasis on the regional. No one park or natural asset can accommodate the myriad of activities they were advocating. Los Angeles provides a very different type of social canvas upon which to gather, recreate, and traverse. Mobility (in several forms) was foundational to the experience of the City, not just dedicated open space. Too often, as practitioners, we throw around metrics, wanting to measure this or that. But if you look at their proposed map under the rubric of recreation, it's expansive; tantamount to Boston's emerald necklace. We aren't park poor as LA is so often maligned to be. And Angelenos, then and now, will travel to enjoy a preferred form of recreation.

How do you read their proposed park system map?



Timeline illustrating LA's population growth against the backdrop of major events relating to open space and transit. (Created by RELM)





LOS ANGELES

2024 Parks + Open Space Network

Los Angeles' modern day Park and Open Space Network  
(Created by RELM using LA County Department of Public Health data)



which are either ineffectual or end up pouring additional resources into sites that need them least.

According to the LA County Department of Parks and Recreation, the region has a median of 3.3 acres of open space per one thousand people – low compared to other large U.S. cities. Zooming into the neighborhood scale, the amount of park area varies wildly from upwards of 50 acres per thousand people in Malibu to less than 1 acre per thousand people in multiple neighborhoods across the county. [18]

After studying the evaluation methods of various parks assessments—the ParkScore Index from Trust for Public Land, and the Los Angeles Countywide Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment from LA County Parks and Recreation, to name a few—it is clear that while measuring park area per capita can accurately reflect an abundance or absence of open space in general, it is not very helpful for measuring level of access. Calculating the percentage of a local population that lives within a 10-minute walking radius of a park is better for understanding park access, and it is notable that these two metrics can be completely inversed when comparing two places. The City of Santa Monica for example, has only 4.1 park acres per thousand people, but boasts a robust 82.6% of the population living within a 10-minute walk from a park. The City of Los Angeles on the other hand has a higher per capita metric, with 11.5 park acres per thousand people, but only 62% of the population live within a 10-minute walk from a park. [19] Comparing these two numbers

might reveal a bit about discrepancies in park access and distribution, but to truly understand the state of open space in any given community, we will require a deeper and more spatially focused analysis.

For me, the real question comes back to access and investment. In his interview, Olin recalled “one of my favorite JB Jackson quotes, reminding us all that ‘every American is entitled to a landscape that is biologically sound, socially just, and spiritually rewarding.’” [20] Considering the very uneven playing field that exists currently, how do we define planning goals and distribute resources moving forward to achieve that kind of equitable open space landscape?

## VB

When I look at the maps, a few items jump out at me. First, where would we insert local parks? The development cost of pocket parts is exceptionally high given land cost, so much so that The Trust for Public Land has started converting alleyways into publicly accessible open space. “There are 900 linear miles of alleys in the city of L.A., and a disproportionate amount of those alleys, 30%, are in South L.A. alone,” said Robin Mark, Los Angeles Program Director at the Trust for Public Land. [21] These alleyways can capture stormwater and provide safer access to schools.

These are certainly part of the local solution but in my years working with landscape architects, private development is pivotal for LA’s open space network. POPS

(privately-owned, public space) are key drivers to ensure the pleasure of inhabiting the city. RELM’s founder, Scott Baker, refers to this concept as granular landscapes that in mass, create compelling districts/neighborhoods. And that’s the point I feel Olmsted + Bartholomew advocate so compellingly for in their report—there needs to be pleasure, efficiency, and access to and with nature in the city. I don’t feel all corridors need to be secluded from the street edge as they proposed via pleasure parkways. In that regard, I like Olmsted Senior’s idea of street hierarchies and bringing character and pedestrian activity to dedicated areas.

The second thing that strikes me in comparing the maps is the recognition of the tremendous will it takes to design, finance, and maintain a park. One of my first memories of relocating from New York City to LA was attending Lauren Bon’s 2005 art installation, ‘Not a Cornfield.’ She transformed an industrial brownfield north of Chinatown into an agricultural site for one season now the home of the Los Angeles State Historic Park. It took 12 years from installation to opening. Time is such a critical factor for improving cities. I then thought back to 2017 when LACMA proposed a South LA satellite campus envisioning ‘a de-centered museum in a de-centered metropolis.’ The two sites they considered were in parks – South Los Angeles Wetland Park and Earvin “Magic” Johnson Park. It was such a remarkably exquisite idea: displaying art and providing school and community programming (lectures, music, and an art library). Sadly, the museum terminated its agreement with the Department of

Recreation and Parks this September, citing budget reasons. I feel it’s a giant loss for all involved.

The one metric I found telling was TPL’s annual park investment. Los Angeles spends \$108 per resident, while New York City’s allocates \$202 per resident. [22] That’s nearly 50% less! So, while LA is recreation-rich, parks have and continue to be underfunded. Olmsted + Bartholomew conceded the herculin effort funding their plan would be. “The dilemma confronting us is the large expenditure involved in action, on the one hand, and the heavy penalty of delay, on the other.” [23] Their 1930 Parks Plan proposed an incremental tax to fund and manage their plan in the most brilliant of manners, referencing the cost of running cars. “[The tax] is equivalent to the cost of operating each pleasure automobile in the County approximately eight miles per month.” [24] They go on to champion the expenditure:

**A city destined to be one of the great cities of the earth is justified in assuming such a burden for the well-being of its inhabitants and for its renowned throughout the world.**

The inevitability of Los Angeles, ensconced in its spatial and cultural dimensions, comes with a price tag. That was true in 1930, and it is true today.





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<sup>11</sup> Olmsted Brothers and Bartholomew. Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region. Citizens' Committee on Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches. 1930. p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Olmsted Brothers and Bartholomew. Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region. Citizens' Committee on Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches. 1930. p. 47.

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<sup>23</sup> Olmsted Brothers and Bartholomew. Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region. Citizens' Committee on Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches. 1930. p. XIV.

<sup>24</sup> Olmsted Brothers and Bartholomew. Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region. Citizens' Committee on Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches. 1930. p. XIV.



