

The bold plan would've ringed Los Angeles with parks. Elites killed it.

The quiet death of a 95-year-old dream

A hiker walks on a path through lush greenery in Angeles National Forest in California.

Ekaterina Chizhevskaya/Getty Images

By **Erin Rode**, *Contributing LA Outdoors Editor* Nov 19, 2025

Over 150,000 acres of interconnected green space. At least one playground for roughly every square mile in residential neighborhoods. Long parkways, stretching for miles from the mountains out to the ocean, providing green space alongside scenic drives, connecting Los Angeles' mountains, rivers and beaches.

All of this was laid out in a forward-thinking and ambitious vision for LA's park space by the Olmsted Brothers nearly a century ago, in a 1930 report titled "Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region." The plan, in partnership with Harland Bartholomew & Associates — a consulting firm from urban planner Harland Bartholomew — would have created a greener Los Angeles, one vastly different from what we see today.

Instead, the proposal was killed off nearly as soon as it was released, and by the same governing body that had commissioned it — leaving generations of Angelenos to wonder what could have been.

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A general view of the Griffith Park trails in Los Angeles on Jan. 24, 2025.

Jessie Alceh/SFGATE

The Olmsted-Bartholomew plan is LA’s “most significant alternative blueprint — and its biggest missed opportunity,” according to [Never Built Los Angeles](#), a 2013 book compiling over 100 ambitious proposals in the city that never came to fruition. And the forgotten project feels especially pertinent now, as the city grapples with [how to address a shortage of park space](#).

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The Olmsted Brothers — a landscape architecture firm run by the sons of Frederick Law Olmsted, who famously designed Central Park in New York City — were behind the ambitious vision for LA’s parks. The plan similarly prioritized massive amounts of park space while also recognizing that, in sprawling Los Angeles, green space would need to be distributed throughout the region, rather than in one large, centralized park.

Many of the early ideas laid out by the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan are now used as benchmarks when it comes to public space. At the time, just 14 miles of Los Angeles County’s 70-mile shoreline were publicly owned. The plan proposed acquiring as much of the coastline as possible and setting aside a vast stretch of uninterrupted public beach, decades before the [California Coastal Act](#) prioritized maximizing public access to the state’s beaches. The plan suggested using schoolyards as much-needed neighborhood parks, [an idea that persists today](#) as a way for Los Angeles to quickly scale up park access. And crucially, the proposal aimed to place all residents within

half a mile of a park, or about a 10-minute walk, a metric now used by the Trust for Public Land to measure park access. Olmsted and Bartholomew even suggested the inclusion of high desert landscapes as part of the plan, in part to protect Joshua trees.

A view of the San Gabriel River from Seal Beach, Calif., on Aug. 20, 2025.
Jessie Alceh/SFGATE

The massive amount of parkland would have been split into around 71,000 acres of smaller neighborhood parks and 92,000 acres of larger parks, such as reserves set aside in the forest and desert. (The plan included land that was already publicly held at the time, such as parts of Angeles National Forest.) Connecting all of these outdoor spaces would be the pleasure parkways, spanning 200 to several thousand feet in width and stretching from the mountains out to the coast, following the paths of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel rivers. The parkways would total around 440 miles.

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The ambitious proposal would take 40 to 50 years to complete, but if it came to fruition, “the Los Angeles region will be provided with the finest outdoor recreation system in America,” the LA Times reported in 1930. It would also help preserve the natural landscapes that had drawn so many new residents out to Los Angeles in the first place.

An aerial view of the Los Angeles River as it passes through Long Beach, Calif., and into the Pacific Ocean.
MattGush/IStockphoto via Getty Images

If the plan wasn't implemented and development continued unchecked, "urban growth will fill in one after another of the open spaces ... [leaving people] shut off from any considerable area of open land," the plan said.

That was already the prevailing worry. The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce had commissioned the report on parks across the county, due to a growing concern that the booming city was dedicating less space to parks than other metropolitan areas. But just as soon as the plan was presented, it was quickly and quietly shelved for good. The proposal ultimately received little attention from the public, and besides the initial news report in the LA Times about the plan's release, few historical news articles mention it. A book about the plan published by historians Greg Hise and William Deverell in 2000 noted that the chamber itself, the same body that had asked for the report, limited its circulation.

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The exact reasons for the plan's demise are unclear. The LA River Master Plan, a document guiding the current plans for transforming the LA River, noted that the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan was difficult to implement, given the large expected costs and the need for a new governing body to oversee it. Never Built Los Angeles put things more bluntly: "The plan's radical reordering of public and private space, and its potential to halt unremitting land speculation, were anathema to the very cadre of city elites who'd commissioned the report in the first place."

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About eight years after the plan's release, [a massive and deadly flood hit Los Angeles](#), and the region responded by taming its rivers into concrete channels. In the decades that followed, the city's population grew from just over one million to nearly four million people, the region sprawled farther outward into fast-developing suburbs, and new parks couldn't be created fast enough to keep up with the growing metropolitan region. Today, [Los Angeles comes in at No. 90](#) in an annual report comparing parks across the 100 largest U.S. cities.

But some groups are eyeing the long-shelved Olmsted-Bartholomew plan as a blueprint for the region's future. "Everything we do is inspired by that plan," said Claire Robinson, the managing director and founder of Amigos de los Rios. The nonprofit "pulled [the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan] off the shelf in 2003 and said, 'How can we bring this to fruition?'"

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The [Olmstead Vision](#), as shown on a [map of the Los Angeles region](#).
The City Project via Flickr

In the over two decades since, the group has focused on its [Emerald Necklace Vision Plan](#), an interconnected loop of parks and greenways anchored by the [San Gabriel](#) and Los Angeles rivers, inspired by the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan. "Despite the significant alteration of the natural landscape in the last 80 years, some of the core recommendations of the plan remain as relevant today as they were in 1930," said [the Emerald Necklace Expanded Vision Plan](#), which was released in 2014.

Over the years, Amigos de los Rios has worked on [green schoolyard projects](#) at over a dozen schools, established parks in Arcadia and El Monte, and [created river](#)

greenways along the San Gabriel and Rio Hondo rivers, all in pursuit of a parks-filled vision of Los Angeles created a century ago.

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“They were scandalized at the time when they said your population is too big for your parks and public spaces,” Robinson said. “Fast forward 95 years, and it’s gotten exponentially worse in terms of the public health impacts to people. We’re saying we can’t go back in time and do everything that should have been done.”