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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

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TYING BOWTIE TOGETHER

ALONG THE L.A. RIVER, SALT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS MUST BALANCE THE BOWTIE'S FREE-FORM PAST WITH THE NEED FOR CHANGE.

BY PATRICK SISSON



An 18-acre sliver of land in Los Angeles that slices across the postindustrial landscape like a propeller blade, the Bowtie parcel represents a hybrid somewhere between urban decay and industrial rebirth. The former Southern Pacific rail yard was acquired by the California Department of Parks and Recreation in 2003 with the intention of converting it into a public park. But in the ensuing nearly two decades, a community of artists and neighbors has grown a cultural ecosystem of art installations, graffiti, and open-air performances, as well as other less formal uses. Many community members now feel that any future for the riverfront parcel needs to reconcile, and be in dialogue with, its vibrant present.

This past March, in support of a state effort to finally turn the site, which outside of events is technically closed to the public, into a park, SALT Landscape Architects and the architecture firm RADAR Inc. released a conceptual design proposal for the landscape, and the federally funded Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership awarded a $5 million grant toward its construction. The challenge has been to deliver a design that includes claims to a wild, open space amid Southern California sprawl, says Michelle Frier, an associate principal of SALT. The firm sees its role as that of curator and protector. "The Bowtie was already a park," she says.

Allen Compton, ASLA, the founder and principal of SALT, says the firm's landscape architects and designers have for years attended events by the local arts collective Clockshop, which, among other things, has commissioned site-specific sculptures and campfire story nights near the riverbank. SALT focused on community outreach, including partnering with Clockshop, which established a Bowtie Youth Council to incorporate the insights of 14- to 22-year-olds—often the most active but least represented people in park projects—and continued knocking on doors and contacting residents at vaccination sites during the pandemic.

By SALT's calculation, the team spoke to more than 2,000 residents, with responses suggesting a desire for improvement but not wholesale transformation. "The Bowtie started as a community-driven mission to transform industrial space into a green oasis as part of efforts to revitalize the Los Angeles River," says Clockshop's director of community organizing,

ABOVE
Olga Koumoundouros's *Roundhouse Shines* is one of many site-specific interventions staged at the Bowtie over the years.

CLOCKSHOP



RIGHT
Native plantings and pathways are meant to create a fairly wild space for exploration and escape.

Hugo Garcia, who lives in the area. "The community deserves to have a role every step of the way to continue shaping what this space will ultimately look like."

SALT's proposal for a park that offers space for local community and creativity is careful to avoid overdesigning and lets visitors discover the site instead, with walking loops, ecological restoration efforts, informal gathering and picnic areas, and more meadow—such as riparian plantings on the riverbank and woodlands near the remaining train tracks. The goal is to create something more navigable yet reminiscent of the site's more uncultivated past. The prominent and popular railroad roundhouse and Jersey barriers, both covered in graffiti, will be preserved as part of the final design.

While the conceptual plan represents a historic step for the project, the parcel is just beginning to coalesce. SALT will soon begin a formal schematic design phase (they're waiting for the completion of the grant and state approvals), soil reclamation is continuing, and the Nature Conservancy is at work on a two-and-a-half-acre stormwater capture and habitat creation demonstration project. California State Parks is chasing national funding grants to round out the project's budget, which it hopes to land later this year. (Currently, there isn't a full estimate for the park's cost.) All of these puzzle pieces will fit into the 100 Acre Partnership at Taylor Yard, a multistakeholder organization that has been advocating for the Bowtie's restoration and whose mission is to create a massive, continuous urban wilderness.

Clockshop has also embarked on a cultural asset-mapping project to locate and connect with local cultural practitioners. Sue Bell Yank, Clockshop's executive director, says she feels the flexible design proposal offers an opportunity to evolve the Bowtie in positive ways. While formalizing the park brings inevitable change, altering the place that has served as a canvas for so many, the hope is that the changes on the table preserve space for the kinds of creative expression that gave the area its character.

"I've been an Angeleno long enough and seen enough change [that I] can see this as a net positive," Yank says. "But there's always that little piece of loss you feel when something goes away."

CONCEPTUAL PLAN

1 TNC WETLAND

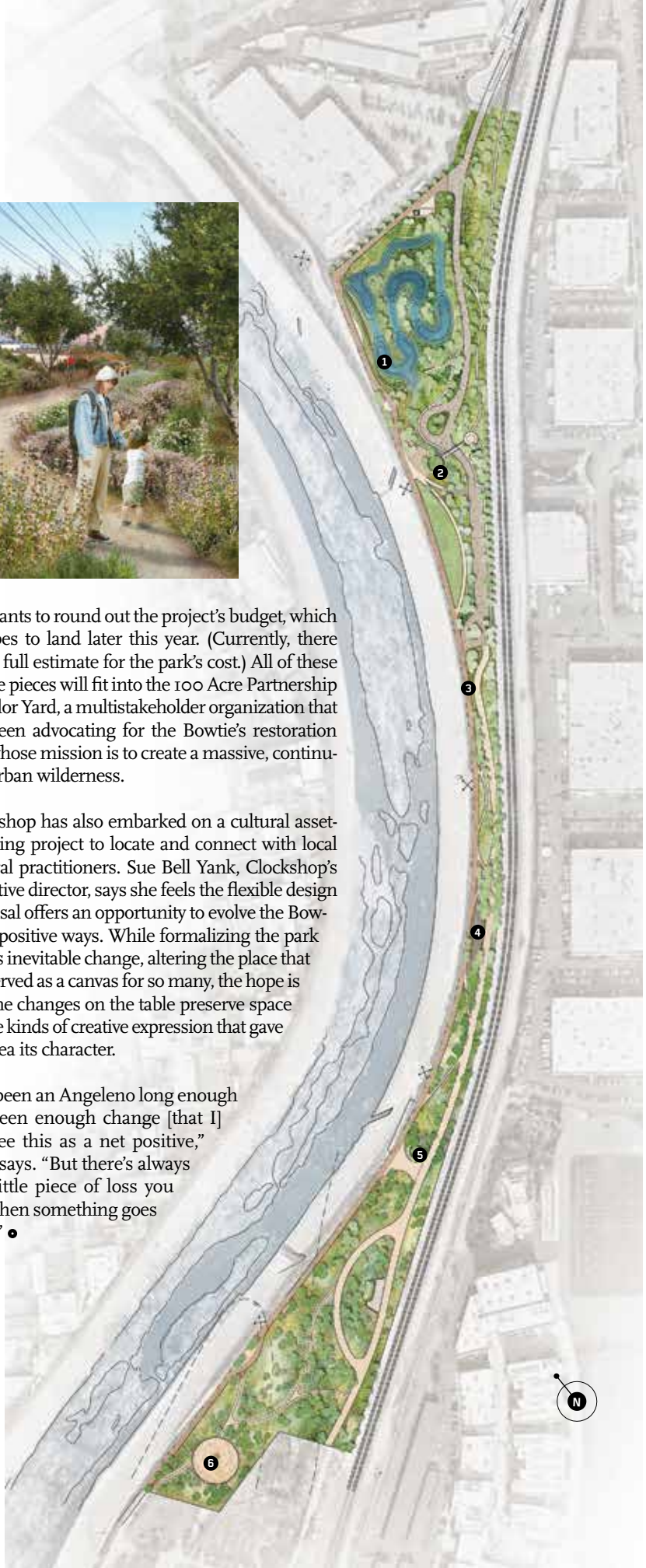
2 VISITOR PAVILION

3 PASEO DEL RIO

4 CENTRAL PLAZA

5 RESTROOM

6 FORMER TURNTABLE



COURTESY SALT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS