

Opinion: A state park's miracle and disappointment

By Joe Mathews

Riddle: When is a miracle also a disappointment?

Answer: When the miracle is a California state project.

Case in point: the miraculous recent opening of the Los Angeles State Historic Park.



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Miracle one: It's a large (32 acres) park—with broad grassy fields large enough to fly kites or hold big concerts, and a signature bridge with selfie-ready views of the downtown skyline—in the densely crowded center of park-poor Los Angeles.

Miracle two: It was built on a historic railyard and industrial site that required costly soil decontamination and was originally planned for business redevelopment, before the state saved it for parkland.

Miracle three: The state's woefully underfunded parks department built this park with public funds, in an era when major parks require donations.

Miracle four: The park didn't die during a 16-year odyssey that coincided with a crippling recession, budget crises, and

an accounting scandal inside the parks department.

So why do all these miracles add up to disappointment? Because in a state where it's so hard to do anything impactful, this park's story reminds how hard it is to do something world-class.

The park represented, in the words of one state press release, a "once-in-a-century" opportunity for California to reshape a transit-connected parcel extending from Metro rail's Chinatown station to the L.A. River. But just getting the park opened in the face of obstacles required many compromises, not the least of which was a reduced \$18 million price tag for a park that was originally planned as a \$55 million facility. And so the Los Angeles State Historic Park still lacks the basics of a great park.

Like shade.

There are no shade structures, and small, newly planted trees provide little relief from the blistering sun. Many of the features of the original plan for the park, advanced a decade ago, haven't materialized—no elaborate gardens, no fountains, no children's playground. And the park, which is supposed to be a community asset, is open for limited hours—8am to sunset—and is cut off by fencing and trains from its two bordering thoroughfares, Broadway and Spring Street.

My first visit, with my three young (and quickly bored) sons, left me angry. Here again was the California disease: Our big ambitions aren't matched by dollars or management follow-through. If this park—with so many champions, from state politicians to local activists—can't be better, what hope is there for other California plans to create new, dynamic public spaces?

This is not merely about a state government with a dysfunctional budget system, and byzantine regulation and planning processes. Rich folks in New York ponied up millions

in donations to make the High Line (a \$152 million project) brilliant. Chicago and its philanthropists devoted \$475 million to Millennium Park, which is of a similar size to the L.A. State Historic Park. Why haven't our rich people and corporate interests stepped up and done something grand here?

The answer to that is a very long story about a lack of cohesion, generosity and imagination. (I still carry a torch for architect Thom Mayne's 2006 idea for the park property: Move Dodger Stadium to the park space, and instead create an even grander park where the stadium now sits, paid for by selling some development rights.) Instead, the State Parks Department—with its constant budget troubles, and having barely survived efforts to close dozens of state parks in recent years—had to perform a cut-rate miracle. Couldn't billionaire Eli Broad have sold off a few pieces of his art collection to add more to this park?

Despite such frustrations, let's stay positive. What's not done is not done. And the good news is there's still time and opportunity to make this park truly great.

Already, developers are starting to transform the industrial space around the park into resident-friendly locations. There's a brand new nonprofit friends group that should support the park. An in-park restaurant and a new water wheel project from artist Lauren Bon and the Annenberg Foundation are on their way. There's plenty of space to add a children's playground, shade structures, and a bridge over the Metro Gold Line tracks to connect the park with people who live along the Broadway corridor. Perhaps hours could be extended to something that matches the life of the neighborhood—6am to 10pm.

"Now that the park is open, you have the canvas from which to create the future," says the tireless Sean Woods, superintendent for the Los Angeles sector of California State Parks, who has been working on the park since its 2001

beginnings.

All that will require is more money—and the miracle of Californians taking full advantage of an opportunity to do something great. Until that happens, enjoy the park—and bring lots of sunscreen.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.