

LA River Master Plan- Green Gentrification Analysis

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Introduction & Background

The 2021 LA River master plan is taking on the task of redefining and revitalizing all 51 miles of the river to include more greenspace, thorough bike trails, and a wider flood plain without the concrete slabs that have become synonymous with its existence throughout the city of Los Angeles. Frank Gehry and Laurie Olin are the lead architects behind the design process. The project is estimated to cost 19-24 billion dollars over the span of 25 years and is expected to cost 1.5-3 million dollars to maintain annually. The master plan includes demographic information on communities who live along the river, planning strategies for each portion of the river, and funding allocation for the duration of the project. There has been public concern on how this plan will affect current communities who live near the river and whether or not this plan includes tenant protections and is taking the well-being of residents into account (Prieto, 2021).

Previous studies on urban greening programs show that through green reinvestment in historically low income and minority neighborhoods, there is potential to resegregate cities and create an inverted suburbanization, which can benefit a select few and displace many people in the process (Anguelovski et. al, 2019). Socially just and inclusive strategies must be in place in order to prevent the displacement of people during large scale environmental projects like the revitalization of the LA River. Financialization of nature and green spaces are directly connected to rising property values which could put current homeowners and renters at risk to be bought out or displaced to make way for wealthier residents (Anguelovski et. al, 2019). I will attempt to explain how the L.A. River plan meets the framework Julian Agyeman developed for just sustainability. Does this plan improve quality of life and well-being for all people, does it meet the needs of both present and future generations, does it keep in mind and provide justice and equity in terms of recognition, process, procedure, and outcome, and lastly, does it attempt to stay within ecosystem limits? (Agyeman, 2013).

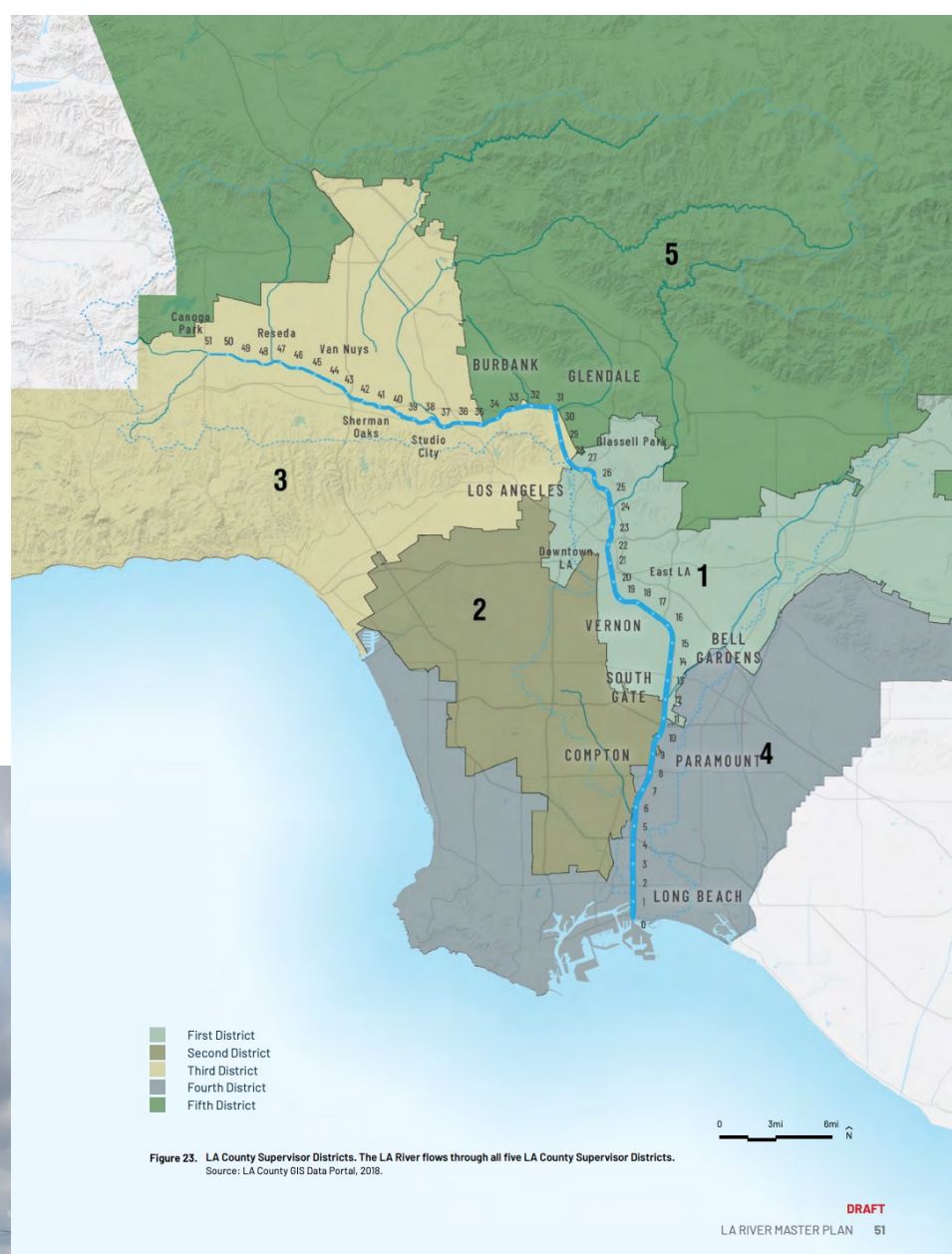


Figure 2: Map showing the five Supervisor Districts that the LA River flows through. (Pg. 51 of LA River 2020 master plan)



Figure 1: View of the LA River and its current design near Downtown Los Angeles. (Shutterstock)

Methods

The aim is to evaluate the LA River Master Plan based on a socially just framework that not only addresses environmental concerns but also accounts for current issues like affordable housing, homelessness, and displacement for residents that live near the LA River. What solutions are currently recommended or lacking in the plan and how can a just process and outcome be ensured for all community residents if this project is to be carried out? Are tenant protections and anti-eviction policies being enforced to avoid further displacement of already vulnerable communities? Public comments serve as the basis for input and reactions surrounding this plan. The public comments were collected from community meetings held by the LA River master plan committee. Public engagement reports were created to guide the planning process and remind those in attendance that their opinions and voices were taken into account. These reports are available online for public access. Based on public opinions expressed in community meetings, many residents are both curious, excited, but concerned about housing, potential displacement, and social equity.

Results

Community Meetings for LA River Master Plan : Public Comments

Based on survey results, the large majority of attendees have been local to the area for more than 15 years or have lived in the area their entire lives. The two generations most present in these meetings were Baby Boomers and Millennials. Below are some of the public comments collected and included in the Community Engagement Reports in 2019. Comments regarding homelessness and affordable housing show that many community residents are concerned about how housing, homelessness, and potential displacement will be handled. Prioritizing these issues before the project goes any further has been made clear based on these public comments in communities who have varying levels of displacement already going on.

Glendale:

- “Don’t get rid of people who don’t have homes, let’s create solutions.”
- “Who usually comes to these meetings? How is privilege, access, class, race involved? How will you reach out and acknowledge voices of people who will be affected?”
- “What are the implications for issues of gentrification?”
- “How will you make sure to create equitable access? How will you reach out to people who can’t come to meetings like this?”

Canoga Park:

- “Must try harder with outreach for public comments.”
- “Why are you not addressing existing infrastructure and homeless problems first?”
- “Allow funding to help homeless problems and infrastructure first.”
- “City Planning needs to tend to our existing problems first. Who represents us residents?”

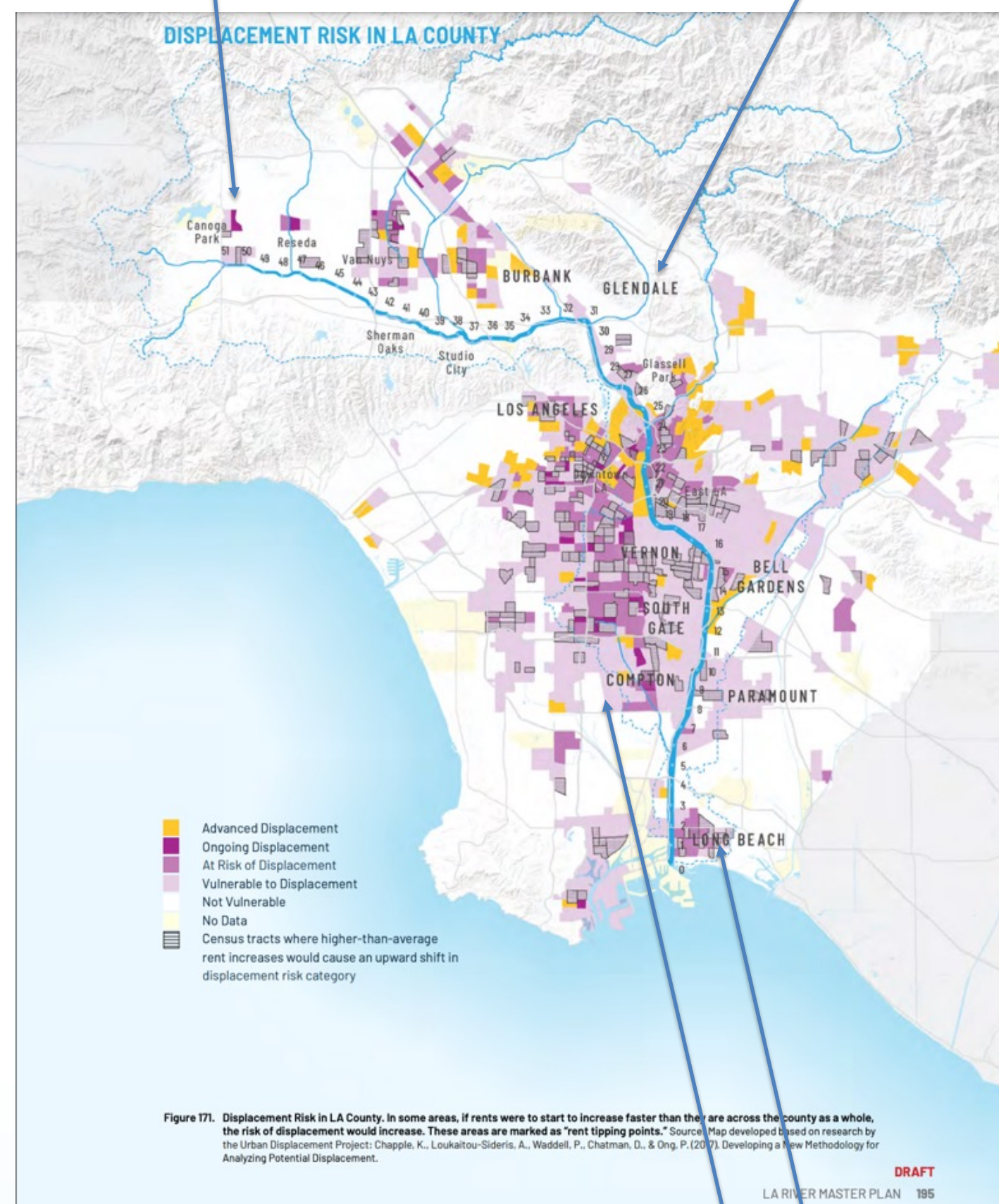


Figure 3: Map of Displacement Risk in LA County (Pg. 195 LA River 2020 Master Plan)

Central Los Angeles:

- “What homeless orgs are you working with to help advise, but also provide services to homeless people along the LA River?”
- “Small businesses must be included in the conversation as they too are too being displaced quietly.”
- “Where is the community? Outreach? Boyle Heights has over 100K residents but barely 50 people are here.”

North Long Beach:

- “Please think about how the needs and rights of homeless people will be affected when they are displaced from riverbed area”
- “Clearing the homeless encampments based on ‘compassionate’ practice is not a solution. This plan avoids the answer of what will be done with homeless residents.”
- “Need all the action to address severe housing shortage.”

Discussion

The public meetings are meant to give residents a platform and an active voice in the decision-making process but as one person said, there needs to be better outreach strategies in place to gather comments and opinions from people who do not have access or knowledge of these meetings. According to a 2018 progress report on the LA River, 75% of the homeless population in Los Angeles were currently sleeping outside and unsheltered. The map in figure 4 shows the need for affordable housing along the 51 miles of the LA River. Critical areas include Downtown Los Angeles, Vernon, Southgate, Long Beach, and Canoga Park. The comments obtained during community meetings call upon prioritizing homelessness and affordable housing before embarking on such a large project with the river.

A previous study on green gentrification discusses the tools implemented by developers involved in greening projects. By using nature as a commodity and promoting greening projects as a benefit for all people equally, reinvestment in financially neglected neighborhoods occurs with a goal to boost property values and attract more affluent people to the area. This leads to an increase in land grabbing, landscape manipulation, and creates accumulation by dispossession in areas with less political and financial power (Anguelovski, et. al 2019).

While the master plan and related reports present demographic information, housing need, and displacement risks, it falls short of providing community residents with a solid plan that is socially just, measurable, and sustainable. The master plan does not propose specific policies and offers vague solutions about how much funding would exactly go into providing affordable housing options. To be a more socially inclusive project, further research must be done on how to better serve the communities there now through the practice of recognition and acknowledging cultural preferences, land tenure, and existing social networks. Implementing an environmentally just framework can help guide the process, inform decision makers, activists, and empower residents to work toward an equitable and mutually beneficial agreement.

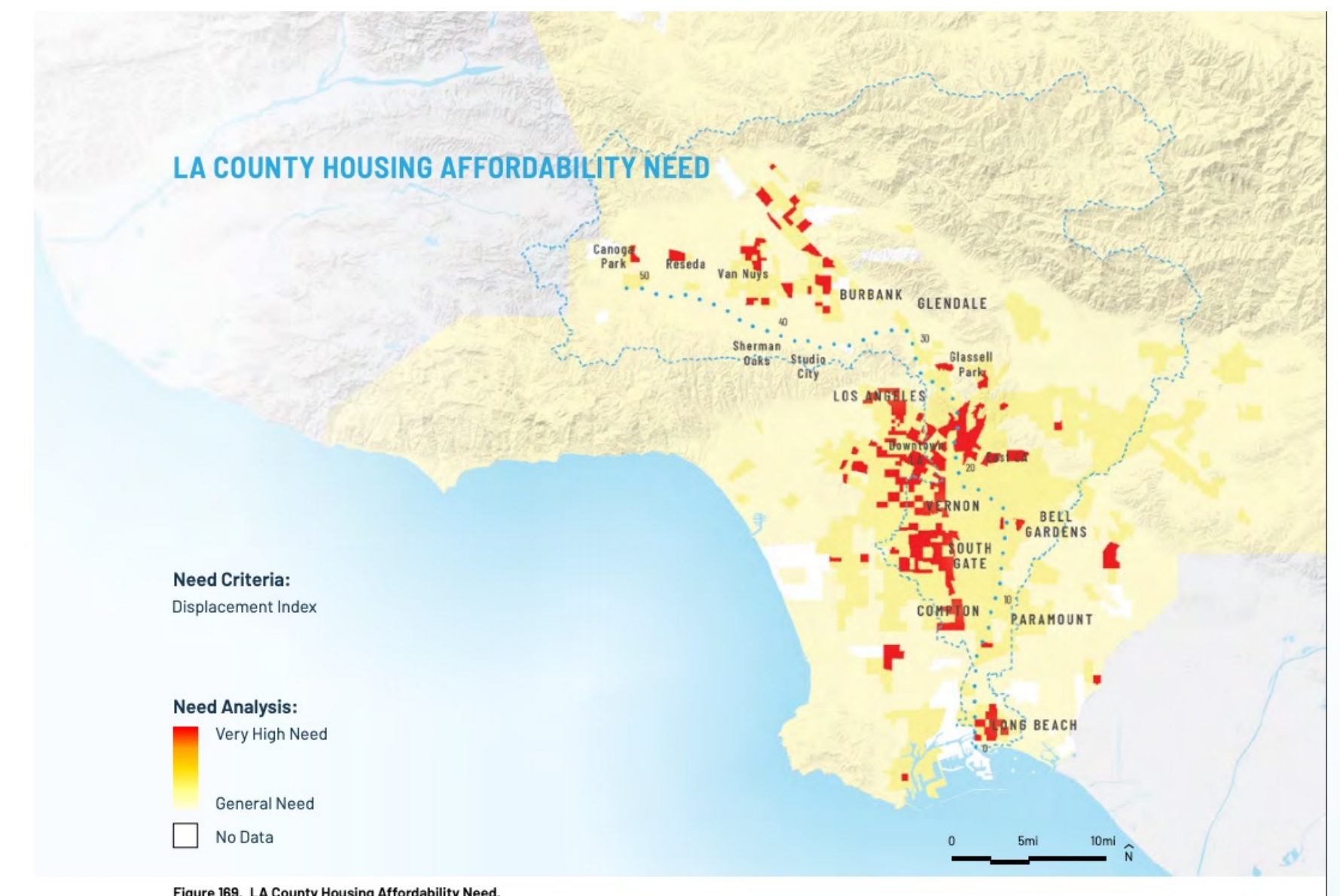


Figure 4: Map of Housing Affordability Need in LA County (Pg. 169 LA River 2020 Master Plan)

Conclusions/Policy Recommendations

- Address lack of strong tenant protections for areas along the LA River. Enforce tactics that advocate for policies that secure right to housing while planning greening project.
- Implement longer lasting ordinances like Ordinance 186585, which protects renters and prohibits certain commercial businesses from being evicted during the COVID-19 crisis in Los Angeles.
- Community Land Trusts funded by public and private partnerships related to the LA River project are recommended to be implemented prior to plan completion.
- Draft a budget that will go directly into protecting, producing, and improving affordable housing units for vulnerable communities near the LA River.
- Use maps on displacement risk and housing need from master plan to draft other specific plans that are carried out in conjunction with design process that addresses housing and homeless concerns first. Specifically list non profit organizations, private and public partners who will be assisting on proposed protections to be carried out.
- Use a just sustainability framework to guide the process of a large scale project such as the LA river master plan to understand the many delicate layers involved in the process and overall outcome.

For more information

Please contact Sarah.DeSantiago@student.csulb.edu for more information on this project.