

Feral Landscapes: Lessons in Resilience

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LOS ANGELES and cities everywhere are home to numerous feral landscapes: designed gardens that have been ‘let go’ and no longer receive intentional care. Typically composed of imported plants from myriad climate types, these gardens have adapted to native rainfall or unintentional sources of water such as broken irrigation systems.

We have located 30 feral sites that survive Los Angeles’s volatile biophysical and social processes, ranging from fire and earthquakes to speculation, indecision and dispute. Gardens by design luminaries Thomas Church and Paul Williams are among the 30, as are former mansions, nurseries and amusement park sites. These sites are rich with information pertinent to conceivable futures where supplemental resources and care may not be reliable. Our intent in this interpretive study is to learn from these sites in their current state of entropy and regeneration, rather than advocating for restoration because many have already been slated for redevelopment.

By noting patterns of plants, water and nutrient concentration, and microclimate conditions, we can derive useful information for shaping future urban matrix landscapes better able to withstand the probability of neglect. This presentation will introduce two broad categories of feral sites noted in Los Angeles, identify observed factors affecting designed landscape longevity, and offer ways to plan for landscape function in light of possible future ferality. This work is intended to spark discussion pertinent to the conference theme: these remnant landscapes are both local and global. Their lessons in resilience and persistence may challenge our current visions of appropriate regionalist urban landscapes.