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## Prestigious International Honors for Innovative, Inclusive Upper Los Angeles River Plan

LOS ANGELES, July 8, 2021 – The influential Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries Revitalization Plan (ULART), creating a comprehensive framework with 300-plus project site opportunities for the Upper Los Angeles River and its tributaries, has earned a prestigious global 2021 AZ Award from *Azure* Magazine.

Prevailing over an international field of project submissions, the winning regional plan – commissioned by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, an agency of the State of California, alongside a working group and the joint-powers authority, Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) – has been applauded for treating the tributaries as “valuable social, ecological, and hydrological players in the fight for equity.” Studio-MLA led the design for the ULART plan as part of the multidisciplinary team primed by engineering consultant Tetra Tech. A 23-member working group chaired by Los Angeles **Councilwoman Monica Rodriguez**, and including seven NGO partners, ensured a close partnership with the involved communities.

The Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries (ULART) Revitalization Plan won in *Azure* Magazine’s highly competitive “Urban Design Visions” category, which had entries from Italy, Canada, the Netherlands and beyond. ULART stood out, winning the field, said the international jury: “This integrated response to climate change via new green infrastructure, as well as the social infrastructure for renewed equity in cities, is urgently needed,” said AZ Award juror Marc Ryan of Toronto-based design firm Public Work.

Winning projects cited by *Azure* Magazine “exemplify excellence in innovation, aesthetics, creativity, and social and environmental responsibility.” The publication received over 1,200 entries from 57 countries for the program’s 10 categories. The win adds to Studio-MLA’s long tradition of critical and peer recognition, and it adds to the positive response to recent, wide-ranging initiatives led by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and MRCA.

“The tributaries of the Upper Los Angeles River have been marred by a history of neglect. Today, the hostile concrete landscape offers little in the way of community space or nature” or

water quality management, according to *Azure* Magazine. “Intending to restore all three, the Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries (ULART) Plan is led by Los Angeles Councilmember Monica Rodriguez, Sarah Rascon of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority [on behalf of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy], and landscape architecture firm Studio-MLA, led by M a Lehrer.”

Along with others, those professionals collaborated as part of the Upper Los Angeles River and Tributaries Working Group, established within the **Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy** by the California State Legislature in 2017. The team was charged with developing a revitalization plan for the Upper Los Angeles River and its tributaries, with a prioritization on disadvantaged communities.

“It was a privilege to lead this effort that begins to address environmental justice issues in communities that have historically suffered from underinvestment. The plan identifies over 300 opportunity sites for open-space amenities accessible to over 625,000 residents who live within a half mile of the river tributaries,” says the ULART Chair, Councilwoman Rodriguez. “Recognition by *Azure* of this plan, developed in collaboration with the community, is a testament that the work we are doing is elevating the quality of life for residents in these communities.”

**Sarah Rascon**, environmental equity officer for MRCA, adds that the working group for the ULART project has included representatives of municipalities, local community leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and elected officials from throughout the Upper Los Angeles River watershed, area. The NGO partners include Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples, Pacoima Beautiful, Friends of the LA River, The River Project, River LA, the William C. Velazquez Institute and the Mulholland Institute. Involved communities that contributed to planning the project’s 344 opportunity areas included six cities throughout Los Angeles County and dozens of Los Angeles city neighborhoods in the Upper Los Angeles River watershed.

“The ULART initiative placed a strong emphasis on disadvantaged areas,” says MRCA’s Rascon. “It also reconnects important tributaries to the Los Angeles River, as it also invests in places that are verdant yet underserved.”

Adds **M a Lehrer**, FASLA, president of Studio-MLA, “Among the investments in the ULART plan is the ability to measure and track benefits for resiliency planning in the communities studied, which is critical to the ULART region. We have created a geodatabase and an evaluation strategy that makes project benefits both quantifiable and trackable, to achieve the region’s resiliency objectives. Solving these challenges requires an organizing framework and collaboration between designers, geographic scientist, information technologists, community advocates, business owners, and the people of these places.”

## About the ULART Plan

In addition to identifying more than 300 projects throughout some of California's most disadvantaged communities – as measured using a specialized tool, CalEnviroScreen 3.0 – the ULART team designed the solutions in concert with natural processes and with the potential capture of 8,695 acre-feet of stormwater per year.

"This is a vast contribution for an area facing historic droughts," says Jan Dyer, PLA, ASLA, principal and director of the Infrastructure Division at Studio-MLA. "The ULART plan also provides over 1,000 miles of shaded green streets and trails, as it preserves and enhances over 6,000 acres of urban wildlife ecology."

Critics have hailed ULART's ambitious goals to "recalibrate natural urban waterways by deploying nature-based solutions to create new community space and help rectify decades of neglect." The AZ Award adds to Studio-MLA's widening acclaim and influence in its creative, restorative plans for major rivers and waterways that intersect with large cities.

Works like the ULART Revitalization Plan show the powerful influence of landscape architects and urban designers on waterways that have been neglected or routed through concrete structures, separating them from native eco-systems.

"Each of the dozen cities, myriad communities, and land uses along the Upper Los Angeles River have a different texture, character, and setting," says Studio-MLA associate Jean Yang, ASLA, APA, a planner and landscape designer. "The landscape architecture and planning disciplines provide the tools to make tangible solutions to address the problems revealed in the study."

The ULART Revitalization Plan has also earned official recognition and praise from public leaders, adds MRCA's Rascon. Applauding its focus on local specifics, the ULART Revitalization Plan was unanimously passed by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy in March last year. **Irma Munoz**, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy chair, called it "a historic day."

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The **Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy** is a State Agency that was established by the Legislature in 1980. Since that time, it has helped preserve more than 75,000 acres of parkland in both wilderness and urban settings. The Conservancy's mission is to strategically buy back, preserve, protect, restore, and enhance treasured pieces of Southern California to form and interlinking system of urban, rural, and river parks, open space, trails, and wildlife habitat that are easily accessible to the general public.

The **Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA)** is a local government public entity dedicated to the preservation and management of open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails, and wildlife habitat. The MRCA works in cooperation with other government partners to acquire parkland, participate in vital planning processes, provide natural resources and scientific expertise, and complete major park improvement projects. The MRCA manages and provides ranger services and fire protection for almost 75,000 acres of parkland that it owns and that are owned by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy or other agencies and provides comprehensive education and interpretation and leadership programs for youth. It is one of the lead agencies providing for the revitalization of the Los Angeles River.

**Studio-MLA** is a design studio that integrates landscape architecture, urban design, and planning to create places that inspire human connection, unite communities, and restore environmental balance. Advocacy is a foundation of Studio-MLA's practice -- a powerful tool to catalyze ecological and social change with inclusivity and authenticity. Significant waterway projects with involvement by Studio-MLA include the Tahuando River PUCESI Urban Studies in Ibarra, Ecuador (now underway), the Arco Tiet River Feasibility Study for S o Paulo, Brazil, and the Hunters Point Vision Plan in San Francisco. Others include the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan, the Upper Los Angeles River & Tributaries Plan, the Lower Los Angeles River Master Plan, the Los Angeles Riverfront Greenway Phase II, and the Northeast Los Angeles Riverfront District Placemaking Plan. The beautiful riverside parks and trails create waterway access and recreation for their communities while also treating stormwater, increasing habitat, and benefiting air quality. Other parks promoting equity and inclusion include the Baldwin Hills Park Master Plan, the Ballona Creek and Trail Master Plan Study, and the Compton Creek Implementation Plan.

**Tetra Tech** is a leading global provider of consulting and engineering services. The firm is differentiated by *Leading with Science* to provide innovative technical solutions to clients. Tetra Tech supports global commercial and government clients focused on water, environment, sustainable infrastructure, renewable energy, and international development. With more than 20,000 associates worldwide, Tetra Tech provides clear solutions to complex problems.