Task II: Research & Analysis
VIEW SHED STUDY

Written by: CHEE SALETTE

SILVER LAKE RESERVOIR COMPLEX
MASTER PLAN PROJECT

September 13, 2019
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Silver Lake Reservoir Complex is a major work of water infrastructure, an historic landmark, an urban wildlife habitat and a vast open space at the heart of the Los Angeles. It is also uniquely defined by the extraordinary water vistas it offers, as well as the views of the regional landscape it enables.

The relationship between the Silver Lake neighborhood and the reservoir complex is symbiotic. The presence of these large bodies of water gives Silver Lake an extraordinary scenery and a unique identity. The topography and architecture of the surrounding hills cradle the reservoirs and form a setting of a scale that it both grand and intimate.

The city has grown around the reservoirs, which were built first, making them the heart of the Silver Lake neighborhood. Nestled between hills on the east and west, the vast reservoir complex can be seen, in whole or in part, from the public realm and from thousands of private residences. In turn, the vast open space created by the reservoirs enables unobstructed views of the neighborhood hills, and also the greater landscape of the ridge of Griffith Park, the foothills of Glendale and Highland Park, and the San Gabriel mountains to the north.

The Silver Lake community has been active for years around the issue of water and has played a major role in advocating for the reservoirs to remain filled after they were decommissioned. At the first community workshop of this Master Plan effort, it was evident that, while there is a range of different opinions regarding the future use and accessibility of the reservoir complex site, there is a strong consensus regarding its essential quality: the water. Silver Lake residents care about the water for various environmental reasons but of universal interest is the experiential delight it provides. Many of the defining characteristics expressed by the community at the first workshop evoke this interest: “vistas, serenity; morning sparkle, beauty”. This aesthetic quality, cherished by so many people, transcends individual delight; it becomes a shared experience that brings people together. The Master Plan aims to build on this.

The primary task of this View Shed Study is to document and investigate the vast array of interesting views from outside the project site looking at the reservoirs, and from within the reservoir complex looking at the surrounding landscape. The purpose is to gain a better understanding of the breath, depth and meaning of the reservoir views for the Silver Lake community and visitors. This understanding will help the Design Team meet the challenges, address the constraints and seize the opportunities described herein. Among them, is the potential for views to further emphasize the strong connection between the water and the neighborhood.
1 DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

The methodology used for this study consisted primarily of walking around the reservoirs, observing the landscape and documenting through photography the most interesting views from within the complex, as well as exploring the hills of Silver Lake to capture the most significant vistas of the water complex from outside the project site. The materials reviewed for this study consist mainly of the hundreds of photographs taken by the Design Team.
2 CHALLENGES & CONSTRAINTS

Challenges

The views of and from the Silver Lake Reservoir Complex are shaped by natural and urban elements that will not be fundamentally altered by the future transformation of the project site that will be envisioned by Master Plan. However, the existing features of the reservoir complex express a certain character that is embedded in the cultural identity of Silver Lake and worth preserving and revealing. For instance, the tough asphalt banks, the more elegant outlet tower and the shimmering surface of the water are part of an overall aesthetic that also blends the rich textures of the densely vegetated hills, the sophisticated architecture of homes by Neutra, Schindler and Lautner, and the rough edges of narrow, cracked concrete streets and patinated mid-century houses. Silver Lake may be beautiful but is not pretty, and the beautification of the reservoir site, which the community desires, should be carefully considered in that spirit.

Constraints

The fact that private homes block the view of the reservoirs for large portions of the neighborhood streets is a constraint on the accessibility of the scenery. This constraint cannot be lessened by the Master Plan, but it can be counter-balanced by the preservation and enhancement of the views that are accessible from the public realm, which is an important part of the opportunities described herein.
3 OPPORTUNITIES

Scenery Enhancement

The Master Plan presents the opportunity to not only protect significant vistas but also strengthen them. Views of the reservoirs can be enhanced by improving the landscape quality, such as the naturalization of the banks for example. Partial views, which frame a specific portion of the reservoir complex site present the opportunity to feature special elements of the proposed transformation, which can become landmarks discovered from specific locations.

Viewpoints featuring significant vistas of the surrounding landscape from the reservoir site may present the opportunity for seating at prime viewing spots along the walking paths, similar to scenic lookouts on a road. The new wildlife habitat that may be created in the transformation of the reservoir complex will itself become interesting an subject to observe, and present the opportunity for viewing platforms and other amenities that help foster a culture of observation of the environment.

As education emerges as one of the main opportunities of the Master Plan project, the evolution of the reservoir complex as a place, an instrument to view the world where the natural and urban environments entwine, would not only nurture the existing appreciation for the visual richness of its setting and the human bond created by its shared experience, it would also amplify its impact on people’s understanding of the changing planet and appreciation for the importance of making a place for nature in our cities.

Connectivity Enhancement

Heightening this sense of connecting to the world around us through views, is particularly opportunistic in the case of this Master Plan because views are already a way to connect the neighborhood and the reservoir complex. The preservation and enhancement of the special vistas, each with its own unique take on the landscape, will also help strengthen connectivity between the various parts of the neighborhood.
4 AREAS OF FURTHER STUDY

The View Shed Study is a first step. The Design Team will continue to deepen its understanding of the views during the design process.

5 JURISDICTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

The Design Team is not aware of any jurisdictional requirements applicable to this topic.

6 POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

The Design Team is not aware of any potential funding sources associated with this topic.
The following appendix contains an overview of the views from outside and the views from inside, as well as key views that have been identified as the most suitable to explore the opportunities described in this document.
VIEWS FROM OUTSIDE
The view from the top of Baxter Street reveals the entire length of the Reservoir Complex looking west. This view offers an interesting juxtaposition between Griffith Park’s open space, which is all mountain, and the reservoirs’ open space, which is all water.
The Griffith Observatory, which appears to be sitting just above John Lautner’s Silvertop house, and the Hollywood Sign mark the backdrop of the Griffith Park ridge.
KEY VIEWS FROM OUTSIDE: LANDA STREET

The view from the end of Landa Street, which is the complement of the view from Baxter Street on the east side, reveals the Reservoir Complex against the larger, more layered backdrop of the San Gabriel Mountains and their foothills. This expansive view connects Silver Lake and its reservoirs to the greater landscape and dramatically changes the balance of natural to urban.
KEY VIEWS FROM OUTSIDE: LANDA STEPS

Similarly, the view from the top of the steps linking Landa Street to Redesdale Avenue echoes the view from the top of the Mattachine Steps, which are directly across the reservoir along the same east-west direction. There may be an opportunity to visually expose or reinforce this alignment and connection across the water.
Going down the Mattachine Steps, which bridge between upper and lower Cove Avenue, we see one of the most iconic views of the Reservoir Complex, which captures the essence of the strong connection between the body of water and the Silver Lake neighborhood.

Further down, as the view is more tightly framed by vegetation, the stairs point to a specific stretch of the west embankment, which today is no different but tomorrow could be the site of a landmark.
From the surrounding Silver Lake hills, the Reservoir Complex is most often concealed from the public realm, blocked by houses and available only to the residents. Once in a while a splash of blue can be seen in between buildings or at the end of a driveway.

The view at the end of Bright Lane features the form of a Pine Tree and a bench along the Ivanhoe path, which is on axis with the street, reinforcing the connection between the neighborhood hills and the water’s edge, which was recently made accessible along the Ivanhoe path.
From the path along West Silver Lake Drive, the grove of trees paints a sharp silhouette against the bright surface of the water beyond, which connects with the trees of the Knoll in the background and shortens the depth of field.
KEY VIEWS FROM OUTSIDE: THE REC CENTER

From the Recreation Center grounds, the view of the Reservoir Complex is limited to the earth dam at its south end and the people walking above, on the South Dam path. This sight does not include any water but is quite dramatic nonetheless, as the presence of the reservoir is felt but not seen.
Moving north on West Silver Lake Drive, the Reservoir Complex reveals itself, and the curved sections of the embankment overlap, as do the figures of people walking, running and biking around. This stacking effect sets up the opportunity to blur the lines between the existing path and potential future paths along the bank, and between the street trees and potential new trees closer to the water.
The view from the path on the east side of the large reservoir, tightly framed by Silver Lake Boulevard on one side and the deeper water on the other, gives a strong sense of the steepness of the banks ahead, which look like cliffs. Should this be a location where they retain their existing slope?
KEY VIEWS FROM OUTSIDE: THE NEUTRA VDL HOUSE

From the roof of the Neutra VDL House, we understand the Meadow’s expanse and get a sense of how its horizontal surface extends the openness of the reservoir beyond. The hill across the water appears densely filled in and vertical in contrast. Though more shade trees may be desirable in the Meadow, its open interface with the reservoir may want to be preserved.
The view from Duane Street is tightly cropped and shows only a sliver of water, but it frames the South Dam and highlights the bridging character of its path following the crest of the berm.

The walking/jogging path reaches its apex at the southern end of Armstrong Avenue, before it flows down into Silver Lake Boulevard. The reservoir is currently shielded from view by the vegetation of the Knoll, however the Master Plan may offer the possibility to open up a framed view of the water or the Meadow, which would heighten the sense of elevation and topography.
The view from the South Dam, looking at the length of the Reservoir complex, celebrates the complex layers of landscape that radiate out from the water. The hills of Silver Lake and the Knoll form the first layer, the hills of Glendale and Eagle Rock the next, and the layers of the San Gabriel Mountains fill the background. This view, like any other, changes throughout the day and the year, but even more so, making the South Dam an extraordinary vantage point. One can imagine how additional layers in the foreground, such as islands, would further add to the fascinating depth of field.
Here again from the South Dam, the complex layers of the Silver Lake setting, enhanced by the reflections on the water, combine a strong sense of place with a powerful connection to the greater landscape, adding the outlet tower as an additional layer in the foreground.
Another great layered sight from the South Dam; in this view the folding east embankment adds complexity to the foreground.
KEY VIEWS FROM INSIDE: THE EAST BANK

The view from the east side of the Silver Lake Reservoir, looking west, features in the background the distinct, unbuilt silhouette of the Griffith Park landscape rising above the hills of Silver Lake, linking the setting of the reservoirs with the greater natural landscape, and juxtaposing two natural habitats that are linked and may become better connected ecologically in the future.
KEY VIEWS FROM INSIDE: THE EAST BANK

Another great layered sight from the South Dam; in this view the folding east embankment adds complexity to the foreground.
KEY VIEWS FROM INSIDE: THE NORTH BANK

The view from the south end of the Ivanhoe Reservoir reveals the top of the Library Square Tower, peeking over the hills of Silver Lake, connecting at this moment the inward-looking neighborhood, which could otherwise be a small town from most vantage points, to Downtown LA nearby. That only a single tower forms this urban backdrop adds to the delightful ambiguity of this sight, in opposition to the wall of mountains visible in the other direction.
KEY VIEWS FROM INSIDE: THE WEST PATH

The North Dam separating the Silver Lake Reservoir and the Ivanhoe Reservoir is a land bridge with water on both sides, a dramatic east-west passage between the two sides of the neighborhood. The difference in size and character between the large reservoir to the south and the small reservoir to the north makes this axial view interestingly asymmetrical. This asymmetry may be accentuated in the future, which may make the view even more interesting, if water remains on both sides.
KEY VIEWS FROM INSIDE: THE EAST PATH

The view looking south along the water’s edge encompasses the journey around the eastern bank and stages the South Dam sitting in the gap between the neighborhoods hills. The concave east embankment creates a bay where the Meadow lies, in perhaps the most propicious place for the future park to descend towards the water.
KEY VIEWS FROM INSIDE: THE KNOLL

From the Knoll we can see the Silver Lake Meadow below and imagine a meandering path between the lower and upper portion of a contiguous open space; a journey starting with an expansive view of the water from the Meadow, losing sight of the reservoir climbing up the slope, and ending with a more intimate perception of the lake from the top (see next page).
The views of the Silver Lake Reservoir from the Knoll, through the trees, break the vast expanse of water into a series of vignettes, this one featuring the outlet tower and its bridge, and the distinctive bulges of the west bank.
KEY VIEWS FROM INSIDE: THE SOUTHEAST BANK

This view from the southeast corner of the Silver Lake Reservoir highlights the carved, man-made character of the embankment where a ramp dives down into the water. This profile can remain as a memory of the reservoir's prior history, and become a moment where people can walk down to the water.
In this view from the west bank, the curved embankment and its horizontal movement is playing off of the vertical and straight line of Baxter Street in the background. This characteristic assemblage of man-made gestures cutting through the blue field of the water and the green texture of the hills is best experienced from this vantage point.
When the surface of the lake is perfectly calm and mirror-like, the surrounding landscape appears to float when seen from the edge of the embankment, without any foreground other than water.
KEY VIEWS FROM INSIDE: THE SOUTHEAST BANK

The infrastructural color of the embankment, warmed up by golden grasses growing through the cracks, contrasts with the lush green hills and marks a strong horizontal band separating the view from its reflection. Maintaining portions of this datum, as an expression of the reservoir infrastucture, should be considered when studying the naturalization of the banks.