"The trench is a reminder that the street level surface we normally think of as the ground, is not the ground at all; but merely a datum line between what is visible and what is not in a city."  -Lane Barden

Our site is the Los Angeles River—a bewildering place which eludes definition, either as a river in the conventional sense of the word or as the merely infrastructural flood-control ditch it is often made out to be.

The LA River is lined in concrete for 80% of its fifty-one mile length. It moves through thirteen municipalities, crosses forty-seven political boundaries, and is under the control of at least four different city, county, and federal agencies. Stand at any point along its length and you will be engaged it its vast network of material flows, transportation corridors, sewage infrastructures, utility easements, and private jurisdictions.

Although it is a river, it is dry for much of the year, not counting the treated wastewater and street run-off which flows through its concrete channel. The river can no longer be separated (either conceptually or exactly) from its infrastructural role as a flood-control measure and drainage outlet—it is literally embedded in it.

The river carves a massive hard-edged void through the fabric of Los Angeles and as it moves through the city it cuts a section across the diverse hetero-cultures of the Los Angeles metropolitan area: the suburban neighborhoods of the San Fernando Valley, the rugged canyons of the Glendale Narrows, the Hollywood studios of Burbank, the light industrial zones near downtown, the port of Long Beach, and so on.

This void, this section, which hides and reveals both itself and its occupations is the site of our research.

* or Zanja Madre, as the Spanish called the river in the eighteenth-century

"We must develop new narratives and vocabularies for our vital urban freakologies for these are the ecologies of the future."  -David Fletcher

Although the city of Los Angeles adopted a revitalization master plan for the LA River in 2007, progress is slow and indeterminate. Much of the revitalization depends upon other revisions and remakings in the city—changes to water treatment and supply mechanisms being the most important. In the meantime, the river waits...

But this void is not empty. Contrary to first impressions, the LA River is not a dead-zone or an ecological disaster—it is thriving. It is home to microorganisms, plants, animals, trash, and humans alike.

Already a place for illicit, provisional inhabitation by the homeless, urban explorers, and environmental activists, the site is an appropriate venue for speculation on the improvisational programs that could occupy it (drag-racing, dancing, urban farming, picnicking, bungee jumping, and of course skateboarding and graffiti art, to name a few). We will consider the ways in which these activities, and others, can be made visible or invisible through architectural intervention, just as the river appears and disappears within the collective consciousness of the city.

Our interventions will be thought of as "pro tem," that is, for the time being—not fixed in place but flexible or adaptable, either to changing needs, changing political climates, or the progression of the aforementioned master plan. Understanding Raoul Wallenberg’s courageous act to be a subversive one, we will seek out the unconventional or illegitimate programmatic conditions which can find much-needed, temporary homes within our site.

Operating under the assumed premise that architecture is instrumental in fostering improvisational collectives and new constituencies, we will work to design the frameworks which can provide spaces for provisional programs and collectives to form along, over, and within the river’s territory.

We will begin the term by studying formal organizational systems and modes of inhabitation, occupation, and intervention followed by a potential site visit to Los Angeles, tentatively scheduled for February 5-9, 2010.