

Fairy-Tale Ending

A California Playground Gets a Second Chance

By Brenda Rees | *Online Only* | Mar. 30, 2007



Saved: La Laguna de San Gabriel Park

Credit: Friends of La Laguna

For almost 50 years, a pirate ship, sea monsters, and an assortment of aquatic critters have entertained children in a remote corner of Vincent Lugo Park, located in the city of San Gabriel, outside Los Angeles.

Kids have dubbed the place "Monster Park" and "Dinosaur Park" because here they can slide down a giant concrete dragon, climb over an eight-foot-tall octopus, and cavort with cement dolphins in the sand.

Officially known as La Laguna de San Gabriel, the playground and public art has weathered the test of time and the elements. Like a true fairytale-land it represents, the story of La Laguna is a testimony to the imagination of a little-known concrete artist, Mexican immigrant Benjamin Dominguez, whose cement creations in the 1950s and 1960 in Mexico and Western United States are slowly being rediscovered and examined.

Early this year, San Gabriel citizens not only saved the beloved play structures from the wrecking ball and are now working with city officials to start restoring them. The rescue was due in part to history-minded residents who excavated the back story of the whimsical little playground.



Dominguez's art

Credit: James Hughes

"We really didn't have much historical information about the playground, and because of that, we didn't realize how important this playground was," says Rebecca Perez, director of parks and recreation for the city that had put the playground on the proverbial chopping block in October of 2006.

Indeed, the city was crafting an overall master plan for the park and wanted to either demolish or move the concrete critters. Perez says "the playground presented safety and accessibility concerns" because of its unconventional structures that were built long before federal safety requirements.

When the city announced its master plan in its October newsletter, a small paragraph about the impending doom of La Laguna's sea creatures started a ripple effect throughout the community.

"I read that and said, 'La Laguna cannot be removed,'" remembers San Gabriel resident Eloy Zarate, who, along with his wife, Senya Lubisich, has frequented the park for years with their four children.

Both history teachers at local community colleges, Zarate and Lubisich took matters into their own hands, mobilizing friends and neighbors to fight for the playground. The couple quickly staged rallies, held petition drives, attended city council meetings and eventually established a nonprofit, The Friends of La Laguna.



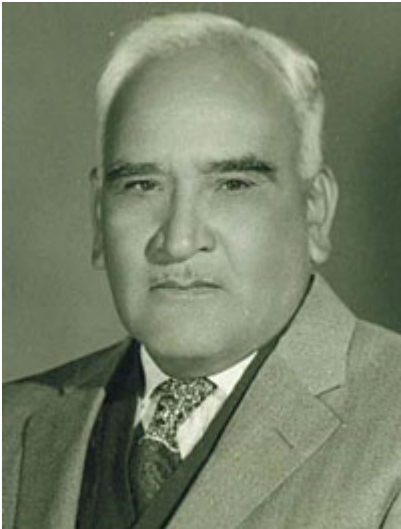
The park's whale

Credit: James Hughes

Convinced that the city needed evidence to keep the park on its historic and artistic merits, Zarate and Lubisich began a fact-finding mission to track down the story behind La Laguna, which became the story of Benjamin Dominguez.

Husband and wife traveled to Las Vegas, Nev., and Redding, Calif., to talk with family members: Dominguez had 13 children. They learned about Dominguez's early life in Guanajuato, Mexico, in 1894 and his days as a student at La Academia de Artes Plasticas of the University of Mexico.

Dominguez's star rose quickly in Mexico, and his work became locally well known. He designed bullfighting rings, stadiums, and even a hotel with a pool on the second floor. Dominguez's most famous Mexican work was in the Mexico City Zoo, where he constructed elaborate concrete enclosures for the lion and tiger exhibits.



Benjamin Dominguez

When the city of El Paso, Tex., hired him to design and construct a concrete playground in 1956, Dominguez, 62 years old at the time, brought his family with him to the United States. Earning citizenship in the mid-1960s, he went on to create a handful of other such aquatic-themed playgrounds in Texas, Nevada, and Southern California that a local magazine in 1960 referred to as "designed to delight and flabbergast."

Most of those structures have been destroyed, but Dominguez's handiwork can still be found today in Southern California at the Atlantis playground in Garden Grove and Legg Lake Park in Whittier.

La Laguna was Dominguez's crown jewel, his last work, finished in 1965, and the most complete project he would ever envision. Dominguez was 70 years old when he—along with helpers, including his then 18-year-old son Rene finished the playground.

"The most amazing thing about my father is that he got all this work, but he never learned English," he says. "People understood him from his presentations and his past work."

Now a retired real-estate agent in Shasta Lake, Calif., Rene says that La Laguna was "built to last" and that the final coat of concrete was mixed with paint, an unusual practice at the time. Each creature took about a month to build, Rene says, and the total cost of the project was about \$12,000.

When the Friends of La Laguna presented the history of the playground, the city agreed early this year to remove La Laguna from its master plan.

Today, preservationists are working with the Friends of La Laguna and the city to figure out the best way to restore this artwork and to seamlessly add safety and accessibility features.



Kids at play

Credit: James Hughes

There's talk of putting the playground—and Dominguez's other Southern California playgrounds—on the state register of historic places. The group is applying for grants to assess and plan for not only for the rehabilitation of the creatures but also their maintenance.

"After all, once we make it look beautiful, we want it stay that way," says Martin Weil, a restoration consultant for the city who has worked on the recent restoration of Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House in Los Angeles, another concrete-based structure.

The issue of graffiti raises La Laguna up to a more important landmark for the city, Weil explains. "We want the community to appreciate the significance of this playground and to realize that this is special and off-limits."

Perez says that with information comes respect. "We want people to think of La Laguna as an icon for the city, a destination, an attraction. We are so grateful that the residents brought us this information. They have done an awesome job, and this is just the beginning."

<http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/story-of-the-week/2007/fairy-tale-ending.html>