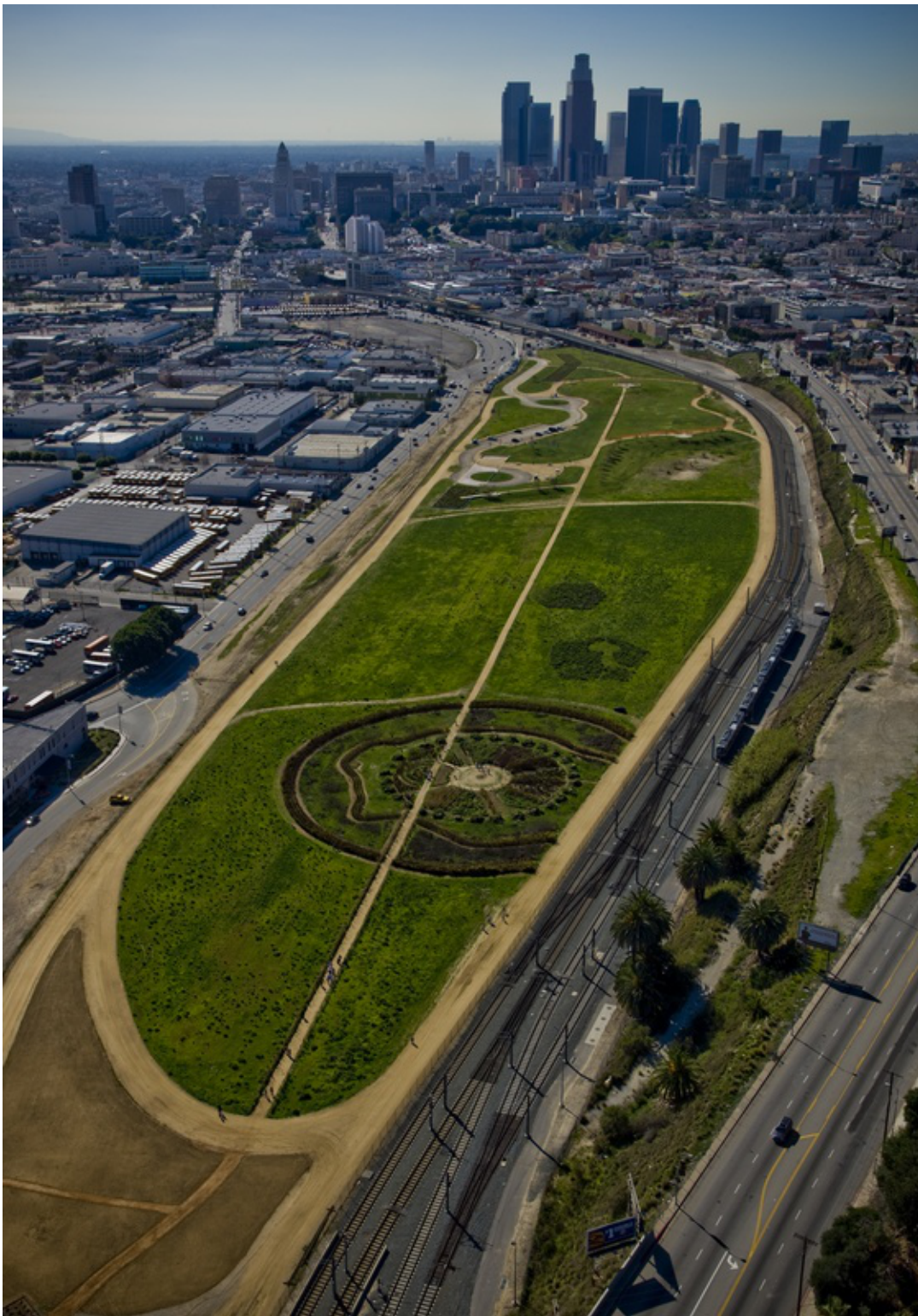


Artists Must Create on the Same Scale that Society Has the Capacity to Destroy

by Lauren Bon

This essay originally appeared in Not A Cornfield: History / Site / Document, 2007.



In 2001 I moved back from London, where I had lived for twelve years; where I had married and had my children; where I ran an art space, The Hereford Salon, that brought artists together to explore work in progress; and where I was a consumer of all that London and Europe had to offer an artist.

I lived without the moniker of "Annenberg." Hardly anyone knew me as part of this family, and even if they had, it would not carry the same weight it does in Los Angeles. I moved back to LA, a single mom with two young children, an artist and soon to be a philanthropist. I moved here just as the new millennium was upon us. A few years later, on my fortieth birthday, my grandfather died. Walter Annenberg, great mythic figure, businessman, philanthropist, and dominant male figure in my life, passed on as I hit the big 4-0, and that same day a grandfather oak fell in my Topanga Canyon garden. The tree fell over as my grandfather was being buried. It fell with the wisdom of the ancients, gracefully into the cradling branches of the neighboring tree. And without a scratch to the pool next to it – not even the deck's guardrails were scratched.

The tree lived in this fallen-over position for quite some time. Soon afterward I began to think about my role in the Annenberg Foundation. My role as a team player in a large asset foundation. My role as family member in a family-run foundation. My role in the branding that had already occurred before I arrived on the scene, namely the notion that the Annenberg Foundation was, and is, to many people, associated with the agenda of the Reagan Administration and conservative politics in general. My role in helping to determine a post-Annenberg Challenge for Public Education identity for the foundation. My role in coming to understand the real needs of our new American society. A society in which there are almost no taxpayer dollars left over for anything else after our spending on defense and war.

What to do about health care, homelessness, veterans' support, education, and the environment? Culturally, what of the unusually high dollar amount being spent on museum buildings when almost none remains for curators, artists, and projects of an unusual variety? And what about Los Angeles itself, both as a cultural and an environmental challenge? Until 2003 the Annenberg Foundation was based in part in Los Angeles, but our central office was in Radnor, Pennsylvania. Finally, who am I in all of this?

I began working with two architects, Jane Harrison and David Turnbull, who were colleagues from my earliest years in London. The three of us worked together over a two-year period on a program of intentions, what in architectural language might be called a "brief." This work took the form of four books that contain graphs, charts, and blueprints for action. We named this work *X-LA* because it started with Los Angeles and emanated out both in time and space. We studied LA as a geographic entity. Its relationship to water became a special metaphor for us both in terms of what is being wasted and in terms of the outer edges of the city's physical boundaries. The *Cornfield* site became an important node for us, a symbol and a place of great potential. At that time, none of us knew that it was already owned by the State Parks system. And despite the fact that we spoke to many people in the fields of architecture, art, and criticism about the site, none of them knew the land's distinct provenance.

So it was a surprise to me when Joel Reynolds, a lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, asked me to have a look at the plan drawn up by the State Parks designers for an interim use park – a temporary park that would be built until the real park, the permanent park, could be designed and money could be raised to build it. Joel and I had a prior history, as the Annenberg Foundation had helped to fund the legal battle that resulted in the site becoming a public space bought by bond money for the State Parks system, and not, after all, private warehouses, as had been the plan.

I was disappointed by the scheme that Joel presented me, and decided not to fund it. At the time I didn't fully understand the intensity of the politics around the land use and definition of the site. The connections between real estate, politics, and public space have certainly become much clearer to me, both from the experience working on *Not A Cornfield* and subsequently in attempting to save the South Central Farm.

In our era, real-estate values set the agenda for much of our experience of place, of city, and of time. This is not good and there are not enough checks and balances on our landlords. LA is therefore not as livable a city as it should be. We have not learned to set an economic value on notions of place and social interaction. This is partly why this project is called *Not A Cornfield*. I mean, if you think of it, how else but through art practice can a vision be manifest? So, this cornfield that is *Not A Cornfield*, which occurred in a place that is more a non-place, took root. Most of this catalog discusses the art, but I also want to discuss the making of philanthropy, it becoming active, as a verb.

Artists must create on the same scale society has the capacity to destroy. Bringing thirty-two acres of regolith back to life was a massive cleanup job. It involved 1,500 truckloads of earth brought in from several different construction sites around the city. The amended soil was irrigated with 82.5 miles of irrigation stripping, and almost one million seeds were planted. Clean soil, water, and seeds were the materials for this metabolic monument and they could not be more basic, less expensive, and more historically apropos. After all, the name "Cornfield" has at least in part to do with the fact that the place would have been an agricultural plain fed by the LA River. It was this fertile land that made El Pueblo de Los Angeles viable. My project aimed at reconnecting the river to the plain. Although as an art project this aim was a metaphor, I would suggest the same permanent solution for the Los Angeles State Historic Park. The land has been agricultural and it should be again. But instead of allotment farming for individuals it should be a collective cornfield for the production of ethanol. And it should be irrigated by the river.

Evolution of an Idea

This transformation of a wasteland into a viable public space, and the nudging forward thereby of LA River planning and urban reconstruction, is an example

of project-based philanthropy. This is what I mean by making philanthropy a verb. This is topical at the moment due to Warren Buffet's gift to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Known in this respect as venture philanthropy, the idea is basically the same as project-based philanthropy: To be effective and to avoid the loss of vision that often runs tandem with large-asset foundations when their founder is gone.

The phrase "project-based philanthropy" evolved in my mind as a way to understand our work at the Annenberg Foundation on the Blue Planet Initiative. This initiative, which took shape in 2004, pooled trustee grants in order to make a difference in environmental issues. Rather than independently dispersed funds, in project-based philanthropy a problem is identified and so is a solution or a set of solutions. Each one of those solutions involves different constituencies and different organizations that, in the funding of them, provide the answers.

This way, there is less waste than in funding several similar organizations. Also, project-based philanthropy sets out to create networks of like-minded people who then learn through the experience of building a solution to pressing problems. For the Blue Planet Initiative, that might mean environmental problems such as the LA River, urban farming, biodegradable packaging solutions, ozone layer erosion, or Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's Million Trees Initiative. Depending on how loosely project-based philanthropy is defined, other examples could include placing water-containment catches, spearheaded by the LA organization TreePeople, on inner-city school playgrounds in order to create flood plains and lower temperatures on those playgrounds by as much as ten degrees. Warren Buffet's son Howard plans to put a clean-water well in every village of Africa. And in New York, Geoffrey Canada's place-based philanthropy within the sixty-block-long Harlem Children's Zone has excited and inspired my family, among many others. These are all good examples of project-based philanthropy on various scales and with different degrees of ambition.

Project-based philanthropy investments should be thought of as seed money to produce sustainable solutions along with participatory and organic stewardship. Project-based philanthropy seeks to lessen the dependence of individual grant seekers who return on an annual search for funds, seeking the same part of a whole. A few years ago, it was difficult to express how this might work to my fellow trustees and the staff at the Annenberg Foundation. We all agreed that there was much to learn in this respect from *Not A Cornfield*. The Foundation implicitly agreed to allow this art project in order to learn about the social, economic, and political relationships required to achieve something greater. The attempt to remediate a brownfield through the growth of

one agricultural cycle of corn gave us this pilot effort, this case study, this testing ground.

Crie de Guerre

Not A Cornfield is first an artist's vision, namely my own. That vision came to me in a dream of blue corn, blue like no blue in nature, seen in my mind's eye at night. Many artists will begin a piece with a dream but this dream was also a *crie du guerre*. A call to enter the race against mediocrity, against bureaucracy, through action. I was not aware of all this then, only of the imperative to act. The vision came to me not long after my meeting with Joel Reynolds. Without much delay, Joel had a new scheme in his hands — an ephemeral art project that would clean up the whole site for the state park and call attention to the place and its magic in a way that only art can. Ruth Coleman, director of California State Parks, liked the plan. I now understand how wildly improbable her agreement was to go ahead. And knowing what I know now, I think it almost miraculous that this happened at all. It very nearly didn't.

My relative innocence as to local electoral politics and the dynamics of power in Downtown Los Angeles may have been a blessing, as I doubt I would have had the nerve to do the piece if I had been more savvy. And I've learned a lot realizing this dream that may enable me to be better at the work I do in the future. I've grown a deep respect for the people and history of Downtown Los Angeles. This is an area often misunderstood to be in disarray. While it might be under the radar, it is not disconnected. There exist teams, clans, and squads of interest groups organized around missions. These missions are to preserve and protect threatened parts of heritage, resources, and cultures. These groups have come to be out of need. Greed and mindless planning have made gashes in what was a paradise and separated many people from the basic things that make daily life worthwhile.

It's a different LA story from the dominant idea of a transient LA with no roots, no will, and no sense of place. The people around the *Cornfield* site have ingrained and intact community characteristics. They can and do organize themselves, often leveling strong demands on the people they entrust to power. Most of our city doesn't know about this. I feel fortunate to have learned through experience. I've become acquainted with key activists like Alicia Brown from Solano Canyon and Carol Jacques from Elysian Park. I understand that the dreams of the *Cornfield* were shared by many before me, perhaps none as strongly as Chi Mui, the late mayor of San Gabriel.

It has not always been an easy learning curve. Indeed it has been at times deeply upsetting. I've been exasperated by misunderstandings between myself and various elected officials, and I've become aware of how much their blessings are necessary for creative public work to be executed effectively. It is disappointing how uninvolved the elected officials and their offices became once we had succeeded in creating a magical space at *Not A Cornfield*.

The same is painfully true of the State Parks bureaucracy. With the large exception of Ruth Coleman's embrace of the project at the very start, I've been aghast by the disassociation of State Parks during the project.

Knowing now what I know about this place and the people who are stewards of it, what would I have done differently? Certainly I would have set up an agenda for an ongoing public-private partnership and a review of the interim use project. No sooner had we cleared off the site and put a metabolic monument of corn bales hydro-seeded with wild flowers on one side than the state-park designers came in and sprayed the toxic pesticide Roundup on the south side of the site, killing all living things. They followed that by creating a clay pan by rolling back and forth on wet earth with heavy equipment. Now nothing can be grown there without retilling the soil. They buried the ceremonial center of the *Not A Cornfield* project under five additional feet of earth, despite entreaties from the local community to keep the fireplace and the circular seating around it. There is supposed to be a design competition for the permanent state park in process, so it is a mystery to me why State Parks has spent so much money creating a "temporary" park – which looks quite permanent – on half the site. State Parks has also turned much of the *Cornfield's* south side into a parking lot. And they disqualified a team I was on from participating in the public design competition for a permanent park on the grounds that the Annenberg Foundation supported the competition.

Less than one hundred years ago, the *Cornfield* and its environs would have been one of the earth's few natural paradises. It would have been an agricultural site fed by the LA River. *Not A Cornfield* returned an industrial brownfield to fertility. That is a gesture I hope can be perennially realized one day. That thirty-two acres of land historically known as the *Cornfield* could again be an agricultural site. One in which property ownership and public space might be thought through differently. The land, communally farmed, might produce a green labor force that can turn corn seed into ethanol and corn stover into fiber for new biodegradable packaging. Artists must create at the same scale that society has the capacity to destroy.

Addendum

Generated automatically on June 4, 2026 from
<https://metabolicstudio.org/22>.
Metabolic Studio supports living systems.