

**Public Art in the Public Park:
People, Place, and Power in the Los Angeles State Historic Park
Robert García, Erica F. Baltodano, Christopher T. Hicks¹
Policy Brief**



PUBLIC ART IN THE PARK

Public art in the new Los Angeles State Historic Park at the Cornfield site should reflect the struggles, hopes, and triumphs of the generations who have entered Los Angeles through El Pueblo and the Cornfield to reflect the dreams of the community, the purpose of the park, and the vision of the Cornfield Advisory Committee. Murals that tell the history of the people and place; community art projects including photography exhibits and oral histories that serve as "family albums" to allow others to see the park through the eyes of the people today; signs, lamppost banners, and other interpretive materials; educational programs for school children; and links to myriad nearby cultural, historical, recreational, and environmental resources can engage the community fully and fairly in the inaugural project for the park. Exhibits can be connected with El Pueblo Historic Monument and the Southwest Museum. The experience of public art that engages and tells the stories of the community in these ways can remain a part of the legacy of the park, and enhance the interim use project and the ephemeral proposal to grow corn there, without compromising the general plan.



THE VALUES AT STAKE

According to the State Department of Parks and Recreation, "The purpose of the Los Angeles State Historic Park is to provide the public with a place to learn about and to celebrate the ethnically diverse history and cultural heritage of Los Angeles. . . . The Park will bring a wide range of visitors together to examine and experience the complete story of Los Angeles. It will be a sanctuary from the dense, urban environment that surrounds it. The Park will connect abstract historical and social patterns to the personal experiences of Angelenos and visitors from throughout the state, the nation, and the world."² This purpose reflects the vision of the legislatively-mandated Advisory Committee that calls for the park to encompass the essential themes of culture and history, connectivity, recreation, and transportation: "A park in the Cornfield should be connected to the struggles, the histories, and the cultures of the rich and diverse communities that have surrounded it since it was settled."³ The Committee specifically called for "murals and other forms of public art" to "create common understanding and celebration of the ethnic, religious, and cultural traditions that were once present, or are now present in Los Angeles."⁴



Family album with photos and story of Old and New Chinatown (L.A. Public Library).

Public art in the public park should reflect the values at stake to bring people together -- providing children the simple joys of playing in the park, improving recreation and health, equal access to public resources, democratic participation in deciding the future of the community and park, educating the public, local jobs for local workers and economic vitality for all, spiritual values of promoting peace and justice, and providing the clean air, water, and ground benefits of safe and healthy urban parks.

¹ Robert García is Executive Director, Erica F. Baltodano is Assistant Director, and Christopher T. Hicks is Policy Director at the Center for Law in the Public Interest.

² California Department of Parks and Recreation, Proposed Declaration of Purpose for Los Angeles State Historic Park.

³ Cornfield State Park Advisory Committee Recommendations Report.

⁴ Cornfield State Park Advisory Committee Recommendations Report.

Public art that reflects these values will revive the forgotten history of Los Angeles and call the attention of the world to the new world class park in the Ellis Island of Los Angeles. This park is a “heroic monument” and “symbol of hope” for the people who made the park happen.⁵

The people who live near the park are disproportionately people of color who live in poverty, have no car, have limited education, and lack parks and green space. 282,967 children live within five miles. These children do not have places to play in parks, schools, or yards. Fully 84% of Los Angeles public school children are not physically fit. Opportunities for recreation should not be delayed. Tongva Chief Anthony Morales has urged people to “work together to ensure that the children of the Cornfields and [nearby] Taylor Yard are not displaced the way the Tongva people once were.”⁶

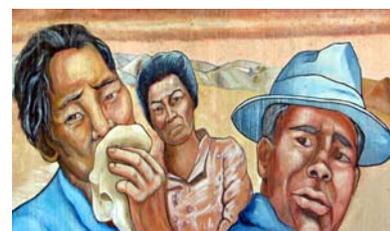
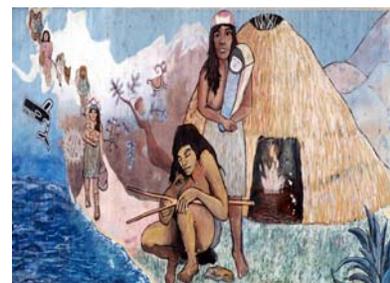
Within 5 miles of the Park

68% Latino
 14% Asian
 11% non-Hispanic white
 4% African American
 49% Completed H.S.
 15% Bachelor’s Degree
 30% Live in poverty
 29% No access to a car

THE HISTORY AND PEOPLE

The park lies just south of the confluence of the 51-mile Los Angeles River and the 22-mile Arroyo Seco, in one of Los Angeles’s most culturally, historically, and ethnically diverse—and park-poor—communities. The park, an abandoned rail yard for over 12 years, is downtown between Chinatown on the west and the Los Angeles River on the east, within walking distance of City Hall, and down the hill from Chavez Ravine.

The park lies near the site of the original Tongva village of Yangna, a site marked today by nothing more than a center divider on the Hollywood Freeway. Los Pobladores, the first settlers, included Spaniards, Catholic missionaries, Native Americans, and Blacks. Mexicans and Californios further established the city before statehood. Mexican-Americans, including U.S. citizens, were deported from the Cornfield during the depression because of discrimination and the struggle for jobs. Mexican-Americans later lost their homes and way of life when Chavez Ravine was destroyed to build Dodger Stadium with places for 50,000 cars to park and not a single place for children to play. Chinese began arriving in 1850 in search of gold and were relegated to dangerous jobs on the railroad and domestic jobs. The site of the Chinatown massacre of 1871, which first brought Los Angeles to international attention, is now a traffic light. The city forcibly evicted the residents and razed Old Chinatown to build Union Station in the 1930s. The people relocated to new Chinatown across the street from the park. The Japanese in Little Tokyo were forced into concentration camps during World War II. Biddy Mason, a former slave freed in the 1850s, became a major landowner downtown and a founder of First AME, a major Black church in Los Angeles. Blacks in the twentieth century were forced into South Central by discriminatory land use policies. Italian and French immigrants, some of whom planted vineyards that graced the area, assimilated into the broader culture. The Women’s Building that has empowered women artists stands at the site.



Historically, the zanja madre or "mother trench" brought water from the Los Angeles River through the site to El Pueblo and beyond. The area was used for diverse agricultural purposes, including vineyards, vegetables, fruits and nuts, corn, pasture, and plowed land. The diversity of crops is a metaphor for the diversity of the people themselves.



Biddy Mason home.

Public art in the park can reflect the power of place: “The power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens’ public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory . . .

⁵ James Ricci, “A Park With No Name (Yet) but Plenty of History,” Los Angeles Times Magazine, July 15, 2001.

⁶ Letter from Chief Anthony Morales to Governor Gray Davis, Mayor James Hahn, and State Parks Director Ruth Coleman (Feb. 2003).

. And even bitter experiences and fights communities have lost need to be remembered—so as not to diminish their importance.”⁷

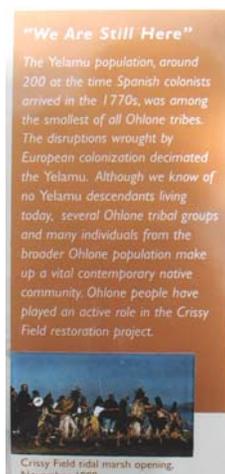
VALUABLE LESSONS

Public art can be an integral part of the inaugural project and the legacy of the park. Crissy Field in San Francisco tells the history of the people and place through interpretive signs, and proudly proclaims how people participated in creating the park. Ohlone representatives, for example, signed an agreement with the National Park Service concerning the interpretation of Ohlone culture, and collaborated in preparing the exhibit. Crissy Field itself is dedicated to those who made the dream of restoring the park a reality.



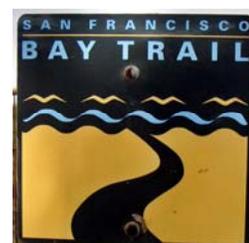
A distinctive icon links Crissy Field and other sites along the San Francisco Bay Trail. An icon can be created for the Heritage Parkscape to link the Los Angeles State Historic Park with El Rio de Los Angeles State Park, El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument, and other resources throughout the region, as discussed below. A trail around the park can provide space for jogging and walking, like RIP (Run in Peace) around Evergreen Cemetery in East L.A.

The mission of Manzanar National Historic Site is to stimulate and provoke greater understanding of, and dialogue on, civil rights, democracy, and freedom by faithfully, completely, and accurately telling the story of Manzanar. The nearby Little Tokyo Historic District and Bidy Mason Park offer valuable insights for how public art here can tell the story of diverse people.⁸ The story of Little Tokyo is embedded in the sidewalk there, for example, and the history of Black Los Angeles in the sidewalk around Watts Towers.



Interpretive signs along “Angel’s Walk” in Los Angeles tell part of the history of the region, but leave out critical facts. The sign outside Union Station, for example, ignores the destruction of old Chinatown. Signs in the new park and along the Heritage Parkscape can tell the full story of all the people of Los Angeles.

To celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Central Park, banners telling the history of the park and the people adorned lampposts throughout New York City. Banners could tell the story of the Los Angeles State Historic Park and the people here now.



The General Plan for El Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historic Park offers a blueprint to create a world class park here (see www.clipi.org). The California Department of Parks and Recreation has also published *Five Views: An Ethnic Sites Survey for California (1982)* that stresses the public's need to become more aware of California's cultural diversity and its tangible manifestations on the land. *Five Views* can guide public art in the new park here.

A community approach that incorporates images such as those in the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* that illustrate this Policy Brief, and community art projects that interweave historical images with personal reactions and new images created by the people, could work here.⁹



⁷ Dolores Hayden, *The Power Of Place: Urban Landscapes As Public History* (1995).

⁸ Id. at 138-87 (Biddy Mason); 210-38 (Little Tokyo).

⁹ The Great Wall was created by Judith Baca and SPARC (Social and Public Art Resource Center) working with at risk youth. Images copyright Judith Baca.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Center for Law in the Public Interest and Anahuak Youth Soccer Association have long supported public art in the park, and have spearheaded the creation of a park that serves the needs of the community as defined by the community. See the Cornfield and the Flow of History: People, Place, and Culture (CLIPi 2004); Dreams of Fields (CLIPi 2003); The Heritage Parkscape in the Heart of Los Angeles (CLIPi 2003). These documents are available on the web at www.clipi.org. The Center saved Watts Towers, an icon of public art, from destruction in the 1980s.¹⁰

We urge public officials and the public to support public art in the Los Angeles State Historic Park that reflects the values at stake and: (1) directly engages community participation and benefits surrounding communities; (2) tells the story of the people and cultures who are integral to the past, present, and future of the park; (3) includes murals, interpretive signs and street banners to educate visitors about the history of the site; (4) honors the diverse community coalition that created the park; (5) includes murals, community art, photography exhibits, and oral histories as "family albums" and local artists to reflect the views and experiences of the surrounding communities; (6) provides educational programs and materials for schools on the environment, the history, and the people; (7) does not delay the interim use plan for and recreation in the park; and (8) is connected with local art projects and interpretive displays in the historical buildings at El Pueblo and at the Southwest Museum.

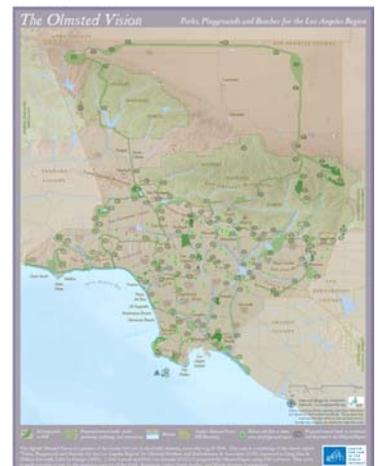
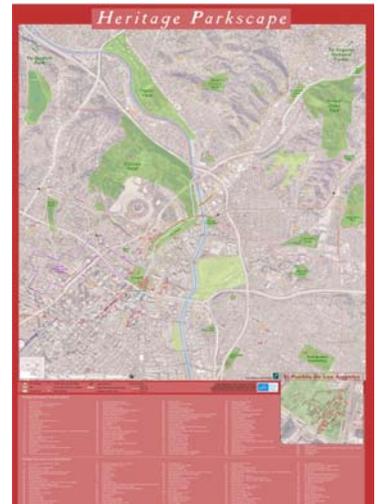
THE BROADER VISION

The theme of connectivity identified by the Cornfield Advisory Committee can link the new Los Angeles State Historic Park, El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument, the new Rio de Los Angeles State Park, and 100 other cultural, historical, recreational, and environmental resources in the ways described above. The footprint of this Heritage Parkscape coincides closely with the Olmsted vision for parks and greenspace for downtown and along the Los Angeles River.¹¹ What better way to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Olmsted plan this year. We can restore a part of that vision and the lost beauty of Los Angeles through a comprehensive and coherent web of parks, playgrounds, schools, beaches, forests, and transportation that promotes human health and economic vitality, and reflects the diverse cultural urban landscape. Public art in the park is an integral part of that collective vision.

The Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Donations are tax deductible.
Center for Law in the Public Interest
1055 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1660, Los Angeles, CA 90017
(213) 977-1035 (213) 977-5457 fax
www.clipi.org
2005



Guatemalan Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchu with Anahuak praising these new urban parks as a way of giving children hope and saving no to violence and war.



¹⁰ Bud and Arloa Paquin Goldstone, The Los Angeles Watts Towers (Getty Conservation Institute and Getty Museum 1997).

¹¹ Olmsted Brothers & Bartholomew and Assoc., Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region (1930), www.clipi.org.