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James Rojas on the cornfields project: "It's a creative outlet for the city."



PHOTO BY ARLENE LIM

LA's Cornfields Project Yields Bumper Crop for Planner's 'Field of Dreams'

By GAYLE ANDERSON

(Sept. 8, 2005) Transportation planner James Rojas stands shoulder-deep in a cornfield, enveloped in rows of green cornstalks that wink at passengers aboard the Metro Gold Line as it wends its way past the Chinatown Station.

Behind him, some 30 volunteer farmers with hoes toil under wide-brimmed straw hats in the harsh midday sun, tilling the soil and tending to 32 acres of corn planted last spring by the "Not a Cornfield" public art project.

In order to prepare the rocky and mixed terrain for the installation, Rojas said, artist Lauren Bon organized the cleaning of 32 acres of brownfield (a term for contaminated soil that requires toxic clean-up) and brought in some 1,500 truckloads of earth before planting 1 million seeds in tidy rows. The project expects to harvest some 2 million ears of corn come October.

"The cornfield is actually cleaning the toxic soil and preparing the site for public use as a state park," says Rojas.

PHOTOS: GAYLE ANDERSON

A spiral path encircles the earthen mound, a central space for community gatherings and a drumming circle.



Don't expect tortillas, popcorn, or cornbread at harvest time, Rojas warns. The crop, grown in toxic soil, can't be eaten and must be relegated to manufacturing uses.

As richly green and precise as any bumper crop from a Midwest farm, the rows of corn that march across the 32-acre field between Chinatown and the Los Angeles River stand in bucolic contrast to the city's signature skyline.

Along the way, Metro Gold Line passengers watch farmers tend their crops just north of the Chinatown Station.



Originally a cornfield at the turn of the 20th century, then a railroad yard, Rojas says the abandoned site was pegged for industrial use when it was rediscovered in the late '90s. But plans to develop the site into an industrial park were trumped by Chinatown Yards Alliance, a determined group of civic-minded community activists, including Rojas, who saw the stretch of land as a rare opportunity for open space.

In 2000, the alliance blocked construction of an \$80 million industrial park. The preservation effort triumphed in mid-2001, allowing the state to purchase the site for development as a park.

During the interlude between plans and funding, "Not a Cornfield" -- an interim public art project described by artist Lauren Bon as a "living sculpture in the form of a cornfield" -- now occupies the site.



A bike path circles the perimeter.

Bon describes the project on the "Not a Cornfield" website (www.notacornfield.com) and includes a calendar of events held on the site during the agricultural cycle. At harvest time, the corn will be moved to another site where it will be dried and then displayed and eventually used for the production of biodegradable containers, says the website.

As Rojas exits the cornfield, he wonders what new experience will take hold on the site when the corn is shucked and the rows of corn disappear once more.

"It's really a creative opportunity for the city," he says, envisioning a series of interim projects that toy with open space and tweak the collective psyche of Angelenos.

But, for now, there's plenty to enjoy in this interim park. Rojas often rides his bike from his Spring Street loft to the gravel bike path that circles the cornfields. And, he rarely misses the popular Friday night drumming and community gathering around the firepit.

With a little planning, he thinks, the fate of LA may be open space, after all.

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