

Cornfield of Dreams:

A Resource Guide of Facts, Issues & Principles

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

The sale of the Cornfield, a former rail yard alongside the Los Angeles River north of downtown, offers an unprecedented opportunity for urban revitalization. It offers the chance to develop a prototype for other brownfields and urban voids like it. A number of characteristics make the site unique, in addition to its large size and its location near downtown. First, its adjacency to the Los Angeles River has inspired visions for its inclusion in a planned River greenway. Also, the site was once owned by the railroads whose Union Station forced the local Chinese community to relocate to its present location adjacent to the Cornfield. It lies next to Chinatown, a redevelopment area lacking adequate housing, jobs, and open space. It also forms part of a zone of declining light industrial and warehousing facilities. All of these characteristics, coupled with a mix of politics and funding strategies, have resulted in competing visions for its future and a debate that is becoming increasingly heated.

In the study that follows, our team of UCLA Urban Planning graduate students has identified the key issues at stake in the Cornfield, and critically analyzed the positions of all parties involved. In conducting this research, our intention was to remain observers of, and not participants in, the debate. To this end, an effort was made to remain impartial, with the understanding that the most pressing concerns arose from the needs of affected communities. The ultimate goal of our study was to produce a resource guide, rather than another plan. The Cornfield has been a part of many plans and studies over the years, and another is not needed. Rather, our report provides three essential elements missing in the debate:

1. An analysis of the facts and issues involved in this case;
2. A synthesis of the best and most applicable existing ideas for the site and brownfields like it;
3. A set of principles that can begin to guide the future redevelopment of the Cornfield and other brownfields.

Methodology

In developing the report, there were two phases of research. The first involved conducting impartial research into the Cornfield situation and the surrounding area. The areas of research and analysis were: the recent history and political context of the issue; the history of the site; the physical environment of the area; the area demographics; plans in existence for the site and the surrounding area; brownfields funding; and, community groups.

The second phase involved further research and analysis of a set of issues that emerged from the findings of the first phase. These issues are: funding; contamination; historical narratives; economic development; parks; housing; and, schools.

The examination of the seven issues, which forms the bulk of the second part of the report, resulted in the development of a set of principles for future development of the Cornfield and other brownfields. These are principles that will help ensure that equitable and sustainable development is pursued, regardless of the land uses developed.

The Analysis of the Cornfield Debate

The following sections outline the findings of the analysis section of the report.

1. Recent History of the Cornfield: Setting the Stage

This section describes the events and political maneuvering after Southern Pacific railroad put the Cornfield up for sale in 1991. It outlines the ideologies and objectives of the Mayor's economic development initiative, the Friends of the Los Angeles River's "The River through Downtown" scheme and the current proposal by Majestic Realty, examining the process of development thus far.

2. Past History of the Cornfield: A Window to Future Uses

The hidden and contested history of the Cornfield has recently come to prominence as a political wedge. This section examines the breadth and depth of this history, including the Gabriellino era, the Spanish, Mexican and Chinese settlements and the development of modern Anglo Los Angeles. It describes these and other trends of development as well as the physical traces of history.

3. The Physical Environment of the Site and Environs

This section describes the physical context of the Cornfield and the surrounding areas. Included are studies and maps of such contexts as land use, zoning, environmental factors, and existing institutional and recreational facilities such as schools and parks.

4. Demographics and Economics of the Area

In addition to physical factors, such factors as demographics and local economics are important to Cornfield redevelopment. This section examines these issues in detail, as well as analyzing the surrounding housing stock, unemployment levels, and job opportunities. Area residents' transportation habits, levels of educational attainment, and incomes are also described.

5. The City's Plans

No less than seven plans in the last eleven years have had the potential to impact the Cornfield; three of these specifically address the site. The area is due to receive an MTA Blue Line Station and it is part of both a Federal Empowerment Zone and a State Enterprise Zone. This section describes these plans and the relevant issues that they address, as well as offering a critique of both the FoLAR and Majestic plans. Finally, it calls for certain standards that any development on the site should meet in order to comply with City plans.

6. Brownfields Funding for the Site

In August of 1999, the City of Los Angeles was awarded almost \$12 million from a cooperative venture of fifteen government agencies, including HUD and the EPA, in order to aid in the development and remediation of the Cornfield. This section describes the details of these financial arrangements, economic incentives and the impact of a change in development plans.

7. Community Groups and Local Residents' Interests

This section outlines the interests and involvement in the Cornfield debate of the four adjacent neighborhoods: Chinatown, Elysian Park, Lincoln Heights, and the industrial district, including the Mead Homes housing project. It also describes the interests of groups outside the area such as environmental and political organizations. Allegiances of these groups, whether with the Chinatown Yards Alliance or Majestic Realty, are described.

The Issues of the Cornfield Redevelopment

The following sections describe the conclusions of the issues section of the report.

1. Funding Options

A wide variety of tools and programs are available at the federal, state and local levels to finance the cleanup and reuse of brownfield sites like the Cornfield. By examining these funding options and gleaning lessons from existing brownfield redevelopment projects, several prerequisites for successful redevelopment of the Cornfield become clear. These include the need for a strong role for local government, the existence of multiple financing sources, and most importantly, community participation.

2. Contamination and Remediation

The recently released results of a 1999 site investigation and assessment reveal that the Cornfield has generally low contamination levels. Thus remediation costs will be reasonable, no

matter what use is developed on the site. A variety of programs and technologies exist and are rapidly evolving to make the remediation of sites like the Cornfield more cost-efficient and safe for redevelopment.

3. Historical Narratives

The Cornfield has a far greater historical background than has been previously made common knowledge, and this history can have a significant impact on development action. The legal protections of historic preservation planning and the cultural issues inherent in confronting historical narratives and artifacts need to be balanced with the interests of future development plans. It is key to address continuity between the past and the future as a basis for enriching understanding of the present and informing future action.

4. Economic Development

Successful local economic development involves more than just creating jobs or developing underutilized land; it also requires improving local quality of life. The best opportunity for achieving local economic development goals is an endogenous approach that considers the local context of existing firms and activities to support and develop a flexible and growing economic environment. For the Cornfield, this approach involves the integration of policies that use the full potential of local physical, institutional, and human resources.

5. Parks

There is a serious lack of open space in Los Angeles and of outdoor recreational facilities in the neighborhoods around the Cornfield. The Cornfield is an historically significant piece of land adjacent to the Los Angeles River, Elysian Park, and downtown tourist destinations. Innovative parks and park funding strategies, such as community gardens that serve as economic development engines and joint ownership between agencies and non-profits, exist throughout Los Angeles. These local lessons point towards a way to incorporate all existing and new local characteristics and amenities into a community park on the site.

6. Housing

In the communities surrounding the Cornfield, there is a growing need for housing, yet space is limited and new housing development stagnant. The arrival of the Blue Line light rail extension station at the corner of Alameda and College Streets presents an opportunity to develop housing with the cooperation of nearby communities to provide for local needs and offer affordable,

location-efficient mortgages. In this way housing has the potential to be a major part of a mixed-use transit-oriented development on the Cornfield.

7. Schools

Chinatown currently lacks a middle school, while local residents' low levels of education and job training inhibit economic growth. The Cornfield presents an opportunity to address some of these pressing needs by pursuing the development of a school that incorporates several levels of education with other community development functions. For example, a precedent exists for using a school to link local youth and adult education to economic development programs and urban void redevelopment, by training for and developing local industrial growth in brownfields remediation.

The Principles for Future Action

The principles were developed in response to analysis of the facts and issues related to the Cornfield, and to serve as benchmarks for addressing the issues. They establish a model for future guidance in this and other brownfield redevelopment cases.

1. Government decision-making should be transparent
2. Local government should advocate for local citizens
3. Community should participate comprehensively in planning and design
4. Recognize unique neighborhood contexts as the basis for action
5. Base economic sustainability on local resources
6. Establish a continuum of local heritages
7. Expand opportunities by mixing uses
8. Realize immediate and long-term goals through an incremental approach
9. Make public space a priority

The first three principles largely address the process of redeveloping the Cornfield. The remaining six principles are future-oriented and relate primarily to site development. The principles are presented in each issue-section with examples of their specific applications.

Conclusion

It is intended that the three sections of this report be used as a tool to help guide future development on the Cornfield. Thus this report should be approached as a resource guide for all parties involved, supplementing and extending the plans that currently exist.

The involvement of the community is key to the redevelopment of this and other brownfield sites, to ensure that whatever type of land use is implemented is sustainable in the long term and to

avoid the lengthy disputes such as that presently centering around the Cornfield. The resources provided by this report, in conjunction with an open, comprehensive participation process involving all stakeholders, have the potential to lead to an equitable and sustainable redevelopment of the Cornfield.

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Preface

The study that follows was conducted during the months of January through May 2000. During that time, the struggle over the future of the Cornfield has changed rapidly. Barely six months ago, it seemed that the sale of the Cornfield to Majestic Realty was only days away. Since then, escrow has been postponed until well into the future. The fledgling Chinatown Yards Alliance, a large and diverse coalition, has become a substantial player, and has played the lead role in publicizing the issues and making information such as the site contamination report accessible to the public. Majestic Realty is still determined to construct warehouses on the property, and they have met with little resistance from City Hall. However, grassroots opposition is growing, and the City now faces not only calls for a full environmental review of the Cornfield, but also a possible civil rights lawsuit from the Alliance. It was within this highly politicized and nebulous arena that the following research was conducted, and it is our sincerest hope that this report be of use in the future planning processes of this and other urban voids in Los Angeles.

Introduction

The sale of the Cornfield, a former rail yard alongside the Los Angeles River north of downtown, offers an unprecedented opportunity for urban revitalization. Since being decommissioned by Union Pacific Railroad, the site has inspired many different visions originating from the City, from community groups and from private developers.

Among the competing visions for the site's redevelopment which have emerged are Friends of the Los Angeles River's (FoLAR) plan for a mixed-use riverfront park providing housing, commercial and open space for the community and Majestic's plan for an industrial park of warehouses and manufacturers, providing jobs. The surrounding communities, which include Chinatown and Lincoln Heights, are divided as to the best possible use of the land. Some people want the economic development the warehouses will bring, but others are more concerned with the lack of adequate schools, open space, and affordable housing in the area.

In the report which follows, our team of UCLA Urban Planning graduate students sought to identify the issues and the stakeholders involved, and to critically analyze their positions vis-à-vis this site. This report is organized with into three sections: the introduction; the issues; and the facts. The introduction section affords the reader a quick overview to the entire study. The issues section provides an in-depth analysis of the most pertinent issues raised in regard to the Cornfield and the facts section contains comprehensive background research into the site and the surrounding area.

The analysis took into account issues of brownfields remediation, historical narratives, open-space access, environmental justice and sustainability, economic development and transportation. IN conducting research, every effort was made to approach the Cornfield contextually. The aim was not to examine the Cornfield as a site separate and apart from the neighborhood. It should be seen as an integral part of the community, one that can create economic opportunity, and combine site and environmental sensitivity with economic growth and social justice.

The goal of this report was not to determine which of the competing proposals for redevelopment of the Cornfield was the most appropriate to implement; rather, it was to understand the issues, needs and goals of the community and of the region as a whole. In remaining neutral observers, it quickly became evident that the most pressing concerns arose from the needs of the affected communities. However, the team decided not to take a role in the polarized land use debate as it unfolded. Rather than act as advocates for the community, a mantle being effectively worn by the Chinatown Yards Alliance, our goal would be to develop a resource guide that takes a broad view of the issues that affect communities near brownfield properties. Therefore, our report provides three essential elements which are thus far missing in the debate surrounding the Cornfield and which are imperative to future brownfield redevelopment:

1. An analysis of the facts and issues involved in this case and in brownfields redevelopment in general.
2. Examples of applicable existing ideas for the site and brownfields like it.
3. A set of principles which can begin to guide the future process of redeveloping the Cornfield and other brownfields..

Methodology

The situation of the Cornfield and its contested terrain has provided a rapidly changing landscape for research. This brownfield is an example of the high stakes involved in the redevelopment of urban voids, especially those adjacent to downtown and important transportation corridors. When viewed from outside the web of stakeholders and funding mechanisms battling to stake a claim to its overgrown and faded railroad tracks, the Cornfield becomes a perfect test case for how economic and community interests can work together to reclaim post-industrial pockets of land in the inner city. In beginning the research presented in the following sections, the members of the research team debated at length the type of study needed, its intended audience, and its necessary approach and methodology. This section briefly lays out the methodology that was followed in seeking to create an insightful and useful analysis of the Cornfield debate.

In the first stage of analysis, effort was made to conduct impartial and comprehensive research into the Cornfield situation and the surrounding area. The areas of research and analysis were: the recent history and political context of the issue; the history of the site; the physical environment of the area; the area demographics; plans in existence for the site and the surrounding area; brownfields funding; and, community groups. This analysis of the site, the area, and the debate around the Cornfield's future ownership and use resulted in the emergence of a number of issues relevant to the debate. These issues were not pre-determined at the outset of research, but rather were allowed to evolve and emerge as findings were gathered.

The most pertinent issues raised were: funding and ownership; contamination and remediation; historical narratives; jobs and economics; parks; housing; and, schools. These topics provided the framework for the second stage of analysis. Each of the categories was examined first in terms of its current trends and general directions, and then more specifically in relation to its significance for the site. Examples were provided to illustrate the categories' pertinence to the site, previous successful methods of development, and general issues at stake. The research of these categories and their exemplification then set the stage for a more synthetic approach to the redevelopment of the Cornfield.

The two stages of research were then synthesized into a set of principles to guide future developments at this and similar sites. The principles provided a means to synthesize of the issues raised and the research conducted. The findings were organized so as to provide the community and regulatory agencies with a useful resource for guiding future development on the Cornfield, regardless of the determined land use.

The Principles for Future Action

The principles were developed in response to analysis of the facts and issues related to the Cornfield, and serve as benchmarks for addressing the issues. They establish a model for future guidance in this and other brownfield redevelopment cases.

10. Government decision-making should be transparent
 11. Local government should advocate for local citizens
 12. Community should participate comprehensively in planning and design
 13. Recognize unique neighborhood contexts as the basis for action
 14. Base economic sustainability on local resources
 15. Establish a continuum of local heritages
 16. Expand opportunities by mixing uses
 17. Realize immediate and long-term goals through an incremental approach
 18. Make public space a priority
- The first three principles largely address the process of redeveloping the Cornfield. The remaining six principles are future-oriented and relate primarily to site development. An expanded definition of each of the nine principles, as well as examples as to how each principle relates to the Cornfields site is shown below. Detailed discussion as to how each issue relates to the nine principles can be found in the second section of this report, which presents the seven issues.

1. Government decision-making should be transparent

A key factor in the resistance to current development plans has been a lack of community involvement and participation in the decision making process. While development plans do not necessarily have to spring from the community, it is the responsibility of governmental agencies to be open and informative about their plans. Communities thus must also be given an opportunity to voice opinions regarding plans that are being made for their areas.

Example: The Community Planning Office of the City of Los Angeles proposed a zoning change to the Cornfield from its current industrial designation to a mixed use designation, in the 1996 update of the 1989 Central City North Community Plan. It is unclear what forces have operated to prevent the adoption of this plan. Also, soil testing to determine the level of contamination on the site began years ago, but the results were only recently made public. Had the local citizenry have been informed as to the processes operating around the site, development might have taken a different path.

2. Local government should advocate for local citizens

Since a great deal of the funding and feasibility of the proposed Majestic scheme depends on government resources, there is a missed opportunity for the developer to concede real community benefits in exchange for the use of public funds. Opportunities exist to leverage public funds for developer concessions. However, the absence of local government in the processes has stifled the communities' demand of public and community related facilities.

Example: The eight-acre set-aside and 15' setback are insufficient, throwaway concessions, as these parcels of land will be difficult to develop. Given the amount of public financing available for the development of the Cornfield the city is in the position to require a mix of uses, even to enable a mix of owners and uses for the property

3. Community should participate comprehensively in planning and design

One of the reasons that the Cornfield is embroiled in so much controversy is that the community feels that plans for its future are being made for them. A more integrative and sustainable approach to development is to work with the community on plans for the Cornfield. This does not mean that the future development must be community uses, but rather that local knowledge and resources are part of the development process - perhaps pointing other options or opportunities heretofore unforeseen.

Example: Opposition to the current plans, both FoLAR and Majestic, comes to a large degree from the lack of community inclusion in the plan-making process, rather than from the substance of the plans themselves. The community has been involved to a certain degree, although somewhat after the fact. Federal brownfields funding is usually delivered with understanding that the community will be involved in the development process.

4. Recognize unique neighborhood contexts as the basis for action

The area surrounding the Cornfield has a very particular character of urban life and built form. Developments which integrate themselves with the area in both form and function become part of the area's flow of life and thus stand a much greater chance of being successful and sustainable. The focus of this principle is horizontal - looking out from the site, as part of a local context rather than isolating it..

Example: The Majestic scheme sees the site as an island, the FoLAR scheme replaces the industrial district with housing, and the Blue Line plans effectively cut the site off from Chinatown. These plans are the result of the expeditiousness of their ideologies (industrial use, mixed

use/greening the river, and ease of access, respectively), rather than being based on a thorough examination of the dynamics of the area proper.

The planning of a park for the site would have to look at the adjacent Elysian Park in order not to duplicate facilities, as well as to provide a connection between them. Industrial development should not ignore the vacant industrial parcels in the adjacent industrial area.

5. Base economic sustainability on local resources

Economic development must build on local resources and ameliorate community needs in order to be sustainable. Local businesses have a stake in the community, and empower as well as employ.

Example: The identification of local industries such as specialty foods can encourage growth in local industries and build on local skill bases. This can facilitate the improvement of area linkages to the local economy and provide for customized training programs based on growing industries in the area.

6. Establish a continuum of local heritages

The area around the Cornfields and the site itself are part of the continuity of historical processes that has shaped them. Development plans must take this into account and be viewed as part of this continuum. Attention must be paid to the historical nature of activity in the area and on the site, as well as the historical cultural groups which form the local community. These factors provide insight into the limitations and opportunities of the area that will affect a future development project.

Example: The development of a specialty foods industry cluster would draw upon resources, skills and unique characteristics of the local community. With the inclusion of urban agriculture, market gardens, skills training, education, and business incubators with the food industry cluster across the river as well as regional transportation networks, a foods-related development stands a greater chance of sustainability than more isolated schemes.

Local historical events could be documented through a linear park along the path of the Portola Expedition, or through the recreation of the Zanja Madre.

7. Expand opportunities by mixing uses

The scale of the site, the diversity of possibilities for its use and the breadth of community needs present an opportunity for implementing multiple uses in a future development. Opportunities of overlapping uses exist in both the function and planning of the site.

Example: By utilizing parks bond money for purchase of a parks easement across the site, public open space and recreational areas for workers and residents could be gained. Coupled with a bicycle path, the easement enjoys multiple users throughout the day. Combining the needs of schools and industry presents the possibility of children's educational activities centering on environmental or agricultural issues as well as adult skills training at school in the evenings or in a separate dedicated facility. Housing integrated with the Blue Line station could be affordable through the use of creative financing mechanisms such as location efficient mortgages, as well as provide the opportunity to integrate housing and community resource development.

8. Realize immediate and long-term goals through an incremental approach

The site has not been in productive use for over ten years and cannot be redeveloped all at once into a final state. Given the impacts of surrounding development such as Blue Line construction and the refurbishment of the Capitol Mills, plans for the Cornfield site might best be made incrementally. Development for the site should take into account changing needs and uses for future communities. One option is to place the site at the disposal of a variety of groups for use in the interim. The phasing of development will allow for future opportunities currently unseen as an incremental approach allows development to grow as it creates its own opportunities.

Example: Begin remediation or containment on certain parts of the site now, and allow the community to utilize the remaining open space until development begins. As part of a specialty foods strategy, this may include the development of market gardens and urban agriculture, or a street tree farm, “combining” or “integrating” remediation and economic viability. As the foods industry takes hold, further support densification can be implemented, including processing facilities, an educational field center, or other related uses.

9. Make public space a priority

Public space is not limited to green spaces alone; rather, it includes a variety of places and spaces such as plazas, streets and parks. Some of these elements are already present in the area, and development for the site should be encouraged to expand these on existing models. The creation of public spaces focuses development on the community, and many opportunities exist in every use type – from cafeterias to childcare centers, as well as the traditional sports fields and picnic areas.

Example: Additional public spaces could be promoted in any development scheme for the site. For example, a school facility, while providing educational opportunities, could also provide community space. The process of bioremediation could also convert places on the site into public

spaces while remediation occurs. Space could be made to improve pedestrian paths between area communities across the Cornfield site, as well as for the provision of market gardens available to community members.

These principles are intended as a guide for future plans and development on the site. How each principle relates to each of the seven issues; funding; contamination; historical narratives; economic development; parks; housing; and, schools is contained at the beginning of each issue in the second section of this report. It is intended that the above serves as an overview to the principles, with a discussion related to each issue fronting each issue section.