



A Prologue to “The Cornfields”

Gaby Winqvist and Peter Aeschbacher

The materials excerpted to create this overview of the Chinatown Cornfields were authored as part of a Comprehensive Project by a team of former UCLA graduate students in the Department of Urban Planning: Peter Aeschbacher, Lauri Ames, Roderick Burnley, Kathrin Lenck, Jean Lin, Hilary Struthers and Gaby Winqvist. Under the guidance of former UCLA professor Marco Cenzatti, the team produced a resource manual for the use of all constituencies mobilizing around the transformation of the Cornfields site. The manual included three elements: an analysis of the facts and issues raised by the sale of the property, a synthesis of the best and most applicable ideas for the site and brownfields like it, and a set of principles to guide the form of future redevelopment of the Cornfield.

The so-called “Chinatown Cornfields,” located north of Chinatown near downtown Los Angeles, is an historically significant piece of land adjacent to the Los Angeles River, Elysian Park and downtown tourist destinations. It has recently become the site of a struggle over the provision of amenities for Los Angeles residents.

Seen in historical context, this recent transformation is the latest in a series of uses. During the Gabrielino period, Native American trade routes enabled the original settlements of the Los Angeles basin. Later, the Spanish implementation of the *zanja* irrigation system allowed for agricultural use of the area. Finally, the introduction of rail enabled Los Angeles’s industrial development in the 1800s.

For a century, the Southern Pacific railroad used the site as a freight depot and switching yard. In 1991, after it had stood vacant for years, Southern Pacific

put the site up for sale. In subsequent years, various proposals for the site emerged. In 1999, Majestic Reality announced a plan to develop the Cornfields for light industrial and warehouse use. The community mobilized in response to the questionable development process and proposed uses.

The potential uses for the site inspired a broad coalition of local residents, preservationists and environmental organizations whose activism and planning finally resulted in the site being purchased for use as a park.

The Cornfield struggle is a microcosm of conflicts in greater Los Angeles, a poly-ethnic drama played out every day in the city. The struggle was brought to public attention largely because of the intersection of politics, economics and concerns for social justice.

Early History of the Area and the Cornfields Site

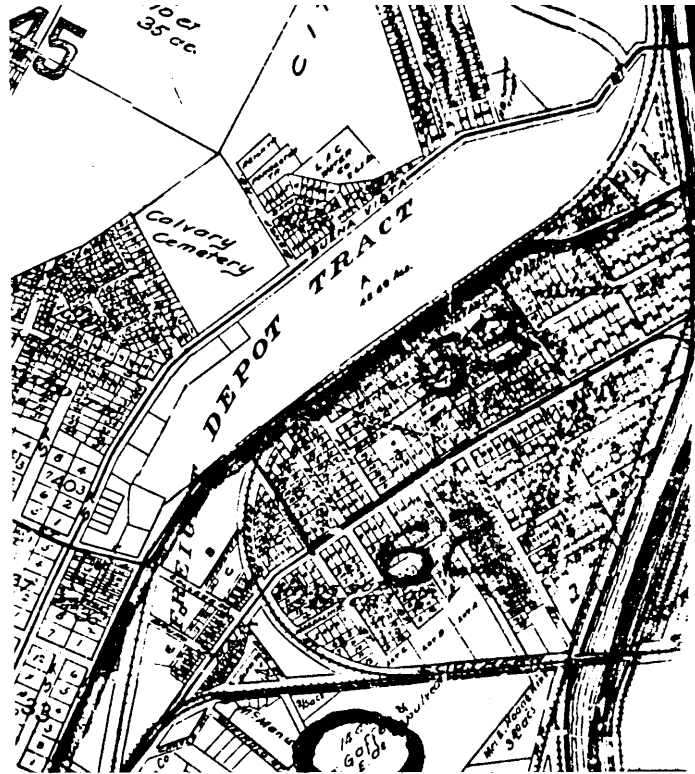
Early Settlement	Yangna, the central village of the Gabrielino Indians, established near the river more than 3000 years ago.
1700s	Governor DeNeve selects the site for Los Angeles on the site of the current City Hall, a few blocks from the river. El Pueblo de Los Angeles is founded. The <i>zanja madre</i> dam is built to supply water and irrigation.
1800s	Land is ceded to the United States and the Anglo government takes over control of the <i>zanja madre</i> . Chinese immigration to Los Angeles begins. The first immigrants come in search of gold, then to work on the railroad. Railroad connects LA with the East Coast.
1900s	For more than a century, the Southern Pacific railroad uses the Cornfields site as a freight depot and switching yard.

Chronology of Redevelopment Events

1989	Southern Pacific puts the Cornfields site up for sale.
1989-1991	LAUSD discusses with Southern Pacific the possibility of using the site for a high school.
1991	KDG Development Consulting prepares a study proposing residential and commercial uses for the site.
1992-1993	Downtown Strategic Plan recommends 12,000 dwelling units be built on and near the site.
1998	The Friends of the Los Angeles River organizes community meetings to discuss the site.
1999	Mayor Richard Riordan introduces Genesis L.A., an economic incentive program to develop fifteen underutilized or blighted industrial/retail sites, including the Cornfields. A deal by Majestic Realty to purchase the site from Southern Pacific to use as an industrial park is announced. Opponents of the plan submit a letter to HUD charging the proposal violates provisions of the federal Civil Rights Act and requests that HUD pressure city officials to require an environmental impact report (EIR).
2000	Majestic project site plan reviewed and approved by the Department of City Planning. The Chinatown Cornfields Alliance appeals the city's determination that the project does not require a EIR.
2001	The Trust for Public Land signs an option to purchase the site with plans to sell it to the state for creation of a park.

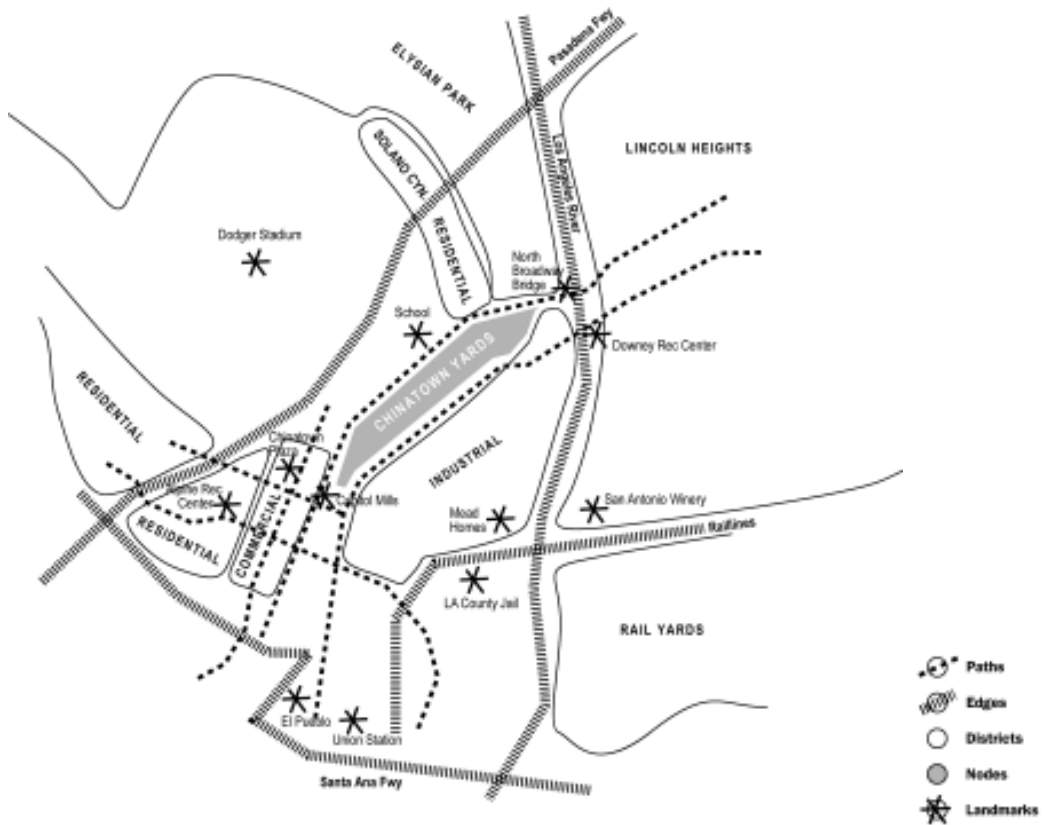


1849 Plan de la Ciudad de los Angeles by E.O.C. Ord
First survey of Los Angeles, indicating roads and land use.
(Does not include all of future Cornfield site.)



1902 Reuger's Map of Los Angeles

Indicates Cornfield site (fully owned by railroad), rail lines and surrounding property subdivision.



2000 Cognitive map of the Comfield area by Peter Aeschbacher



The Cornfield, Los Angeles, CA, 2001 *Gaby Winqvist*

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