

## ***Laguna Canyon Project: Refining Activism***

### ***Preface***

***By Liz Goldner***



The Laguna Canyon Project, a multiphased environmental art project (1980-2010), inspired Laguna Beach, California residents to take charge of their own destiny and to avert an ecological disaster.

With the project's several phases as backdrop and stimulus, artists and activists lobbied local and countywide forces to prevent construction of the 3,200-unit Laguna Laurel housing community in Laguna Canyon—a wide swath of virgin land east of the city's downtown. Along with an army of supporters, they achieved their goal in 1989, and today this canyon is designated as undeveloped land into perpetuity.

Had Laguna Laurel been built, 2,200 acres of what is now park would have been another urban district filled with homes, apartments, shopping centers, and a golf course. Increased traffic from this housing development would have further choked the already congested village of Laguna Beach.

“Laguna Canyon Project: Refining Activism” describes how this project, created by artists and educators Mark Chamberlain and Jerry Burchfield, evolved in response to the threat of construction. The project promoted public understanding of the canyon's ecological importance, and helped shape the

ongoing environmental debates and ultimate decision-making by community and county leaders, and by the landowner.

While the Laguna Canyon Project had sixteen distinct phases, the most impactful was Phase VIII, "The Tell," a 636-foot-long photomural, erected in 1989 in Sycamore Flats in today's 7,000-acre Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. This public art installation, the activism it inspired and its role as the destination for the November 1989 "Walk to Save the Canyon" are still fresh in the minds of many participants.

Laguna Beach is a rare treasure on the California coast, an art-filled enclave that prides itself on its distinctive character. The most traveled route into town is the nine-mile Laguna Canyon Road through the wilderness park. This meandering road is surrounded by seasonally verdant landscapes and magical light. Hallie Jones, executive director, Laguna Canyon Foundation, explains, "Laguna Coast Wilderness Park has some of the last remaining undeveloped coastal canyons in Southern California. The park is dominated by coastal sage scrub, cactus, and native grasses. Over forty endangered and sensitive species call the Laguna Coast home, including the California gnatcatcher, the cactus wren, and the endemic Laguna Beach dudleya."

Laguna's artistic legacy stretches back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when artists from across this country and Europe, many steeped in French Impressionism, moved to this area. Painters, including Frank Cuprien, William Griffith, Anna Hills, and William Wendt, settled here, formed an art colony and used canyon landscapes as subjects of their artwork. Working in the California Impressionist style, they employed the broad brush strokes and pure, bright colors of their earlier French counterparts to capture the picturesque scenery. Their paintings, widely displayed in Laguna today, express reverence for the beauty of the area while preserving on canvas the land in its pristine state. "The Laguna Canyon Project: The Continuous Document" echoes this artistic legacy in its deep respect for the canyon landscapes and in its mission to preserve this area.

"Artivism," combining the words art and activism, describes the collaborative art projects, addressing critical environmental and social issues that Chamberlain and Burchfield (who passed away in 2009) have pursued since the 1970s. The hope is that this record of their accomplishments will inspire others to achieve environmental sustainability in their communities and worldwide.