

The Tell Photomural: Giant Piece of Environmental Art



Giant Photo of "The Tell" at Nix Nature Center, Laguna Beach

A growing army of environmentalists began constructing a 636-foot-long photographic mural called "The Tell" on May 1, 1989 in Laguna Canyon, Laguna Beach, CA.

Photographers Mark Chamberlain and Jerry Burchfield, along with hundreds of supporters, started building the mural - a giant piece of environmental/assemblage art - after three years of planning and months of fundraising.

Since 1989 was the Centennial of Orange County, CA and the 150th anniversary of the discovery of photography, The Tell would be comprised of more than 100,000 photographs, contributed by people from all over the country. They shared the concern about the survival of the historic Laguna Canyon. At that time, the Canyon was endangered by the Laguna Laurel Housing Project - a proposed suburban tract that would have destroyed the irreplaceable artistic face of the historic beach city.

When completed, the mural was a contemporary mound of artifacts and a hybrid environmental artwork that reflected the community's past and looked to its future.

Archeological Term

The name "Tell" comes from the archeological term for a mound of artifacts from

prior civilizations - buried over by natural elements. This Tell was built (rather than unearthed) as a small mountain composed of thousands of photographs, reflective of the lives of the people who donated images. It grew to 636-feet long and ranged from 36-feet high, dwindling down to the ground, as it undulated across the landscape and dove back into the hillside.

The sculptural character of the artwork resembled the voluptuous nature of the surrounding canyons, with echoes of a female figure in its shape. It had a stylized Easter Island head as its physical and philosophical foundation.

Man's Relationship with Earth

An important aspect of the project was that photographs fade in harsh environments. The most commonly printed photos change into a sepia color that resembles the sandstone bluffs of the surrounding landscape.

By carefully patterning longer-lasting prints among those that would change, The Tell's creators embedded a larger message, which slowly emerged from the photomural as the sun beat down on it.

Visitors in the early spring were rewarded with vibrant, colorful images of themselves, their families and friends as part of the very large artwork. Later in the summer and fall, as the canyon was transformed into desert colors, their stories faded to become a part of the background fabric of a larger story of man's relationship with spaceship Earth.

Events and Demonstrations

During the months of construction, the mural became the focal point and catalyst for numerous events and demonstrations. Some were planned and many happened spontaneously. Soon, there was almost daily coverage by regional media.

Then national publications discovered The Tell. *Life* magazine featured a piece on the photomural and its message in the Woodstock 25th Anniversary issue of August 1989. Network and cable news organizations began carrying stories of the project.

For the August 19 dedication of The Tell, celebrating the "birthday" of photography, more than 2,000 people attended, including scores of environmental groups from all across the county.

Veterans Day

On November 11, 1989, Veterans Day, The Tell took on special significance for Laguna Beach and Orange County. The photomural became the

destination for the Laguna Canyon Walk, a critical turning point in the battle to shield the Canyon from encroaching development.

11,000 People Marched

On that day, thousands of concerned citizens turned their backs to the sea and walked The Tell. They believed that this beautiful gateway to the Pacific Ocean should be spared the endless suburban development sprawling across Southern California.

The Veteran's Day walk was officially sanctioned by the City of Laguna Beach. Although estimates varied, nearly 11,000 people marched the canyon, hiked over the hills, and bicycled into Sycamore Hills, the site of The Tell, to express the desire to keep Laguna Canyon free of development.

Their efforts were just in time. This was just before the County Board of Supervisors was scheduled to approve the building of the Laguna Laurel Housing Project.

Largely as a consequence of this dramatic public demonstration, the company, owning the land for the proposed housing project, decided against development of that land and to ultimately sell it off. In 1990, Laguna Beach residents voted to tax themselves to purchase the land to keep it as open space in perpetuity.

Laguna Coast Wilderness Park

The Laguna Coast Wilderness Park stands today where a suburban tract was once planned. The James Dilly Preserve, the site of The Tell, prevails where a final stand once took place in such dramatic fashion.

When The Tell was dismantled, it was coded and stored with the hope that it would be installed in a museum. But it was so politically charged that no art organization would assist in its preservation. Lacking safe storage, most of the photomural burned in the Laguna Beach fire of 1993.