

# High Country News

For people who care  
about the West

November 28, 2011 issue by Laura Pritchett

## Can an old mine become a work of art?

[t](#)



As I wander past a scrawled "NO TRESSPASSING: SHOTGUN ENFORCED" sign, I can't help but recoil and glance around. I am, after all, on private property, and instinct is instinct. My safety at this particular mining site, however, is assured: I'm with a bunch of internationally acclaimed artists and a slew of locals. Even the sheriff's deputy is here, leaning against his truck in his cowboy hat, watching us scramble around abandoned buildings and peer into old mineshafts and adits.

But the safety of the old site itself, high in the San Juan Mountains, is far from certain -- some of the structures may not survive this winter's snowfall. In a larger sense, though, its future is rather

-- and excitedly -- uncertain. This old silver mine and its nearby ghost town are on the cusp of cleanup -- and possibly a remarkable renewal. Which is why, after all, we're here.

**This mine hasn't seen** this many people in a long time -- and probably never this kind of mix. There's a poet from Massachusetts. An Irish sculptor. A historian from Montreal. A landscape architect from England. The seven folks on the creative team are herding big groups of onlookers on a tour of the site in mid-August, just a few miles from the small Colorado mountain town of Lake City. We walk past the old trusses, the bunkhouse, the wooden flume, the four-seater outhouse, and the colorful mound of rocks that is the tailings pile.

It looks exactly the way one imagines an old mining site should look, but what's happening here is unprecedented. The site's owner has offered to donate the mine to Hinsdale County. Unsure whether to accept the gift, the county invited an arts organization to help it decide, and it, in turn, brought in an interdisciplinary team of artists and a pack of technical experts. Now, they're working with the locals to come up with a way to not only reclaim this decaying site, but turn it into a work of art that reflects both Old West and New.

What strikes me most, at first, is what this project is not. It is not about out-of-town artists coming in and "decorating" the site -- perhaps putting up a bronze statue of a gold-panning miner. It's also not about just cleaning up the toxic mess in the tailings pile, planting some grass on top and calling it good. Rather, this group of artists has been working 12-hour days for a month to come up with real solutions -- ones that are deeply creative and environmentally efficient.

They've got plenty of ideas, some way out of the box and others near the edges, but none, they hope, out of the realm of possibility. What about, for example, turning the old miners' quarters into a hostel and doing a "deep-energy retrofit" -- retaining the buildings' historical nature but retrofitting them to current standards?

What about installing Aeolian harps, played by the wind, at the lower shaft -- thus turning part of the mine into a very large musical instrument?

How about turning the old tram, which once transported ore and miners, into a zip line? Or making the tailings pit into an ice skating rink, which would sit right next to a waterfall that delights ice climbers in the winter?

How about phyto-remediation? Foliage could be planted to absorb high levels of pollutants from mine tailings, and it's less expensive than traditional remediation.

And my favorite idea: How about turning the ancient round water tank, a giant redwood barrel, into a "camera obscura"? Popular in Victorian times, such structures position mirrors and lenses to project images of the surrounding landscape. Very few of them exist anymore, but there's even a local photographer who specializes in making them.

In addition to the creative ideas, practical possibilities abound: building interpretative trails, a gathering space and picnic areas, creating an audio tour, using the area for art and education, turning the cabins into living spaces, and simply providing a new stop for drivers on the popular Alpine Loop. Whatever the final decision, the group firmly believes that this mine should be a habitable public space that is educational, environmentally conscious and historically sensitive.