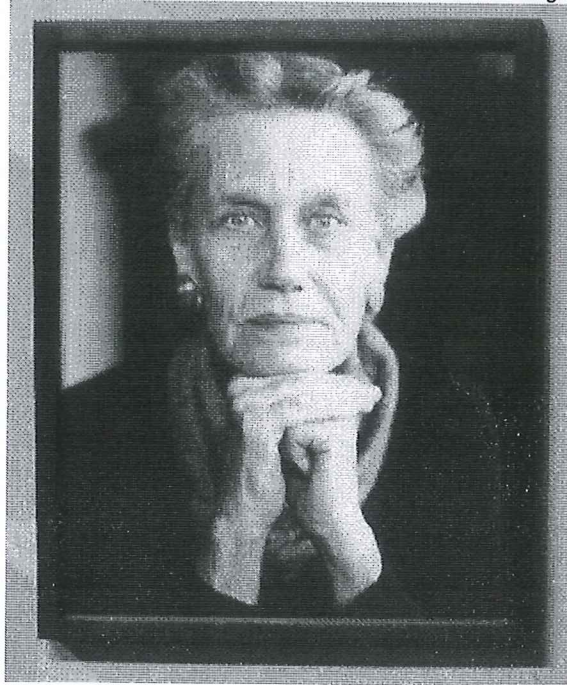


Patricia Tuttle Brown submission to Petaluma Arts Center show on Agri-Culture  
(it was rejected)  
reflecting my vision 8-1-2022 for the future of the 'Petaluma Fairgrounds.'



Photograph by Jude Mooney

kissed by our wind  
nourished by my green  
accompanied by the entire town

here on the main drag  
where I sit and write  
a three page essay

just a city kid at home  
writing of the Fairgrounds  
and my dream for us all

please

read



## AGRICULTURE, PETALUMA'S CULTURE, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF "THE FAIRGROUNDS"

The subject of this show is Agriculture, and my subject here is "the Fairgrounds" and its place in our town.

Having chosen to attend 71 hours of the Lottery-chosen Fairground Panel's deliberations I ended up being the only member of the public attending the entire set of deliberations, (minus 6 Zoom hours.) Like many others in town here, I was not chosen in the Lottery, but I decided to attend anyway, and experience with the Panel--as best I could--the issues swirling the impending creation of a new identity for "the Fairgrounds." I had a notion already that "the Fairgrounds" is an imperative part of identity of this town. I was there as those dedicated 36 listened to speakers, asked questions, talked, & negotiated with one another. Attending all those meetings myself--behind a yellow Do Not Cross barrier where I the public was placed--helped me weave this vision for "the Fairgrounds" that I want to lay out here.

First, the term "the Fairgrounds" has different meanings to different people and needs definition. My definition is not "the Fair" or "The Race Track plus the Fair" or "all the existing tenants and uses" or "55 acres open to redevelopment" or "whatever would bring the highest dollar value to the City." My definition pertains to what force created that Fairgrounds space in the first place: the value placed on food production (which can include food gathering) in the Sonoma and Marin rural lands. Thus "Save the Fairgrounds"-- words springing up in signs around town--to me means: Save and use these 55 acres to invite, create, sustain a committed focus on food production/food producers/food wisdom/food distribution etc. in the Sonoma and Marin counties.

More specifically, my definition of "the Fairgrounds"=Focus On Agriculture=Focus on FOOD in rural Sonoma Marin Counties, meaning I exclude intoxicants: beer, wine, cannabis.

At this time these 55 acres are up for re-thinking. Or some would say, "for grabs."

My overarching concern, or even warning, is: to dilute that property use with other uses than Focus On Agriculture, is to kid ourselves about the importance of FOOD in all our lives. And, in fact, to do so would likely--in my opinion--sound the death knell in this generation for most of the large and small Ag. properties still remaining in old, tired Ag. hands here. Petaluma's environs--which have always seamlessly melded Sonoma and Marin rural lands as one heads west--still have many large and small open farmlands remaining. But in my personal observation: a prime reason they remain in those families' hands is that the stubborn cusses who own the lands--whether they still farm them or not--have simply REFUSED to sell the land, although if truth be told: that's the only way to get rich as a farmer around here.

How long therefore, until these lands--about which visitors and new residents look in awe and say, "Oh how beautiful"--are sold off to the highest bidders by these families so they too can have a nest egg instead of a life in which their kids in high school are called "hicks?" Not much longer. And you can bet the owners will not be other small farmers. Thus: will these landowners see their livelihood honored at "the Fairgrounds' 55 acres" when these City discussions end and votes are taken? Or not? Small farms throughout the USA are being shuttered, as farmers pack it in. Tired of the whole deal. And of course, which food producers are NOT shuttering? The huge feed lots and factory farming industries, who--yes similar to Amazon driving out much of main street business across the country by being able to undercut prices to gain market share--contribute to the decline in viability of small farms also by their ability to sell at lower prices to the consumer than farmers can. (I won't discuss the quality here.)



"How can we not acknowledge the importance of FOOD in our city lives, as we ponder 'the Fairgrounds?' " I ask myself. "Will it only be when all the old fences, barns, green hills are gone and mostly large beautiful estate houses--with glorious gates--gleam out on these properties, that we will realize our error in not remembering the importance of honoring and preserving Ag lands and Ag people of all stripes for the honorable job of getting dirty providing food for us to eat?"

A more specific vision for "the Fairgrounds" follows, and is three-pronged.

1) Indigenous Wisdom: We, as the landowner, need to highlight and honor the ways in which Native Americans did and do think about land and food in this very geography where they have lived for thousands of years. What wisdom can be gleaned: about respecting trees/animals/stream/waterways; about thrifty water use that goes back hundreds and thousands of years; about utilizing and protecting native plants with responsible harvesting for food use; etc. And consider as well their needs in current time: not just what can we learn but what support can be given? The Native Americans of this geography are a current and historic part of the Food picture in Sonoma and Marin Counties, and their wisdom and presence must be part of this complete picture of Food wisdom.

2) Current Landowners' Wisdom: There are many "small farmers" still extant in these two counties. And, small farmers in the main are scrabbling to make a living. Our "Fairgrounds" can be a hub of assistance for these very people who currently run ranches or own land in which farming has can/could/does happen or those who work on these ranches. How? Through affordable, open-to-everyone resources for things such as seed harvest, seed saving, food distribution, worker safety, affordable technical assistance for everyday ranching/farming problems, and much more I have not thought of. One example of a need is the way farmers, taking on the task of protecting the creeks from toxic runoff, have devised a manure system: a means to store- then- spray on fields at certain times. In truth, however, is this the best method? Or is it the one that is most affordable to these farmers? Are we expecting farmers to become technicians/chemists too? The society at large has resources and technology to create a better way than that fetid spray filling the air, but we are not helping the farmers to do this better--and affordably. Instead, people mock the smell and leave it at that. The Fairgrounds can be a base of creative solutions for such issues and a place where people can work TOGETHER. Another example is that many farmers wish to "go organic." But we know that the cost can be high, e.g. when grass-fed beef need extra organic feed in lean years. "The Fairgrounds" can attract a world class set of minds, to affordably and immediately begin to find solutions. IF we believe it can be done and work to make it happen.

3) Creating Young Farmers: Finally, the Fairgrounds must also nurture future food production, something which traditionally of course includes the Fair. But beyond those 5+ days of visibility, where ARE the young people? My hope is that more children of current family farms will take up the call vs. leaving the farm. A little more respect will help. I HAVE come to understand that many young city people, having graduated from college, or having started in the world work at some job or other, are saying, "But--I think I'd rather be a farmer!" Granted, City kids, generally know very little about how much dirty work is involved. But still: here they are. In addition, we have a bevy of "farm hands" both immigrant and non-immigrant working on ranches. Which of them can make the jump to having their own production? How can we/"the Fairgrounds" help? How can we work together to build this next generation, to find ways for them to work with or own lands that exist, for instance: how can "the Fairgrounds" assist current willing landowners to create safe affordable leases provided by affordable lawyers. Yes, this can be world class. Food is universal. Small farmers are a backbone of healthy food.



Finally, to be blunt: let's talk Real Estate. These 55 acres hold great power by simply being Real Estate. For, Real Estate in Petaluma right now is power, and great wealth is rushing here to buy up land (and often turn it over quickly), something visible everywhere, including the 2-bedroom house on almost no land which sold recently in my neighborhood for ~1.5 million dollars! WELL, a plus side of that reality?: dedication of 55 acres of Real Estate to a true Focus On Agriculture in the center of our town speaks loudly! It would be a powerful reminder that kids who look like they might have gotten up at 4 am to milk cows really do not deserve to be called "hick." In fact, perhaps 'heroes' might be an alternative term.

One personal anecdote about food producers as "heroes." We really don't KNOW if/when, economically as well as ecologically, things might get worse in this world, these counties, this town. But let's think: Petaluma 1929. Few expected it. Are we remembering the stories of house-rich-but-suddenly-no-money Petalumans in the 1930's, "after the Crash?"

My father remembered, and told me about this, from his own life. Living in a big house, being a small kid, there was suddenly nothing to eat. And then--came those "distant relatives" who lived "way out in the country," who brought them food. That was a wakeup to a city kid. This is the kind of event which teaches a person that the term "hick" is a disgraceful word--in the pantheon of all the other ugly slurs-- spoken by ignorant people. My father never ceased remembering and reminding me how dependent we ALL are on the men and women who "hold us all together" in the world we share. From the barns, the dairies, the climbing-under-the houses to fix our plumbing or onto our roofs to risk shingling, the gathering of crews to paint and maintain our homes, or the risk of changing our electric box.... it goes on and on.

The Fairgrounds is a pivotal symbol of the working man and woman's place in Petaluma. Most of that work, one does not learn in a book...

My father has been gone for more than a decade now. But is it possible that in current time, we still are a community in which those with the college degrees see it as "just a thing" and do not put up such a snobby barrier between themselves and all those men and women who "hold us all together" in the world we share. Perhaps this is one undervalued reason we hear so many new people say "I just love Petaluma, wanted to live in Petaluma, because the people seem nice." I hope so.

So my advice regarding the Fairgrounds--city kid that I am and always have been-- is that we should not think SMALL about our Fairgrounds here in Petaluma. We should think LARGE, remembering how we do need to eat, and by extension: agriculture's place in our hierarchy of needs and thus the importance of these 55 acres. And just maybe we can even be a force for the larger world of small farmers struggling all over the country.

My contribution to this art show, therefore, is only an essay. But maybe it is also Art as Action. I took the Action of joining 36 people chosen by Lottery to discuss our Fairgrounds issue, joining them as a concerned loving observer. These people—and I, that omnipresent observer—had a good long look at this knotty problem of Fairgrounds and Agriculture and all the competing uses vying for a piece of the lands. In their final report submitted 7/11/2022 to the Petaluma City Council, (p. 3 of "Third Report") the Fairgrounds' Panel's *"#1 Key Point of Agreement"* was *"Agriculture."* What I present here, is my specific vision for a way to envision it THERE at "the Fairgrounds."

Sincerely, Patricia Tuttle Brown, 8-1-2022