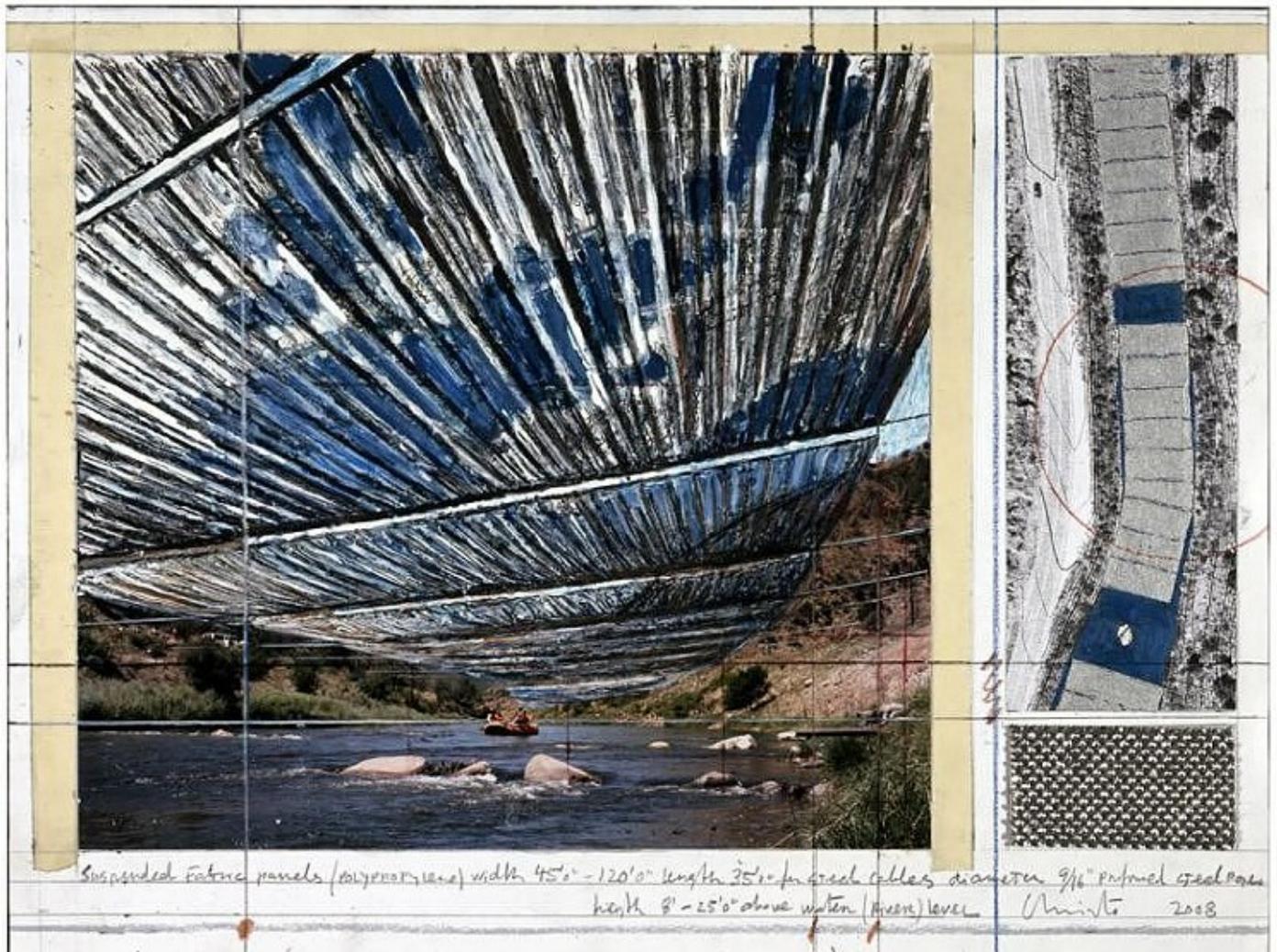


The Many Benefits of Christo's "Over the River" for Colorado: An Op-Ed

BY LORI POTTER

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A view of Christo's vision for "Over the River."

courtesy Christo 2007

In late January, artist *Christo* abandoned plans for "Over the River," the art project he'd been working on for decades, which would have put a 42-mile long canopy over the river. Attorney Lori Potter worked on the plans, and in this op-ed describes the benefits the project had already brought to Colorado.

Christo's unexpected decision to move on from planning the "Over the River" project unleashed the same lively discussion as do his daring works of art. Lost in the tumult, however, was an accounting of Christo's lasting legacy. The significant benefits of the "Over the River" project deserve to be known.

- Before Christo and Jeanne-Claude, his late wife and fellow artist, sought permits for OTR, the Arkansas River canyon between Salida and Cañon City was a parking lot of old railroad cars sitting on an inactive rail line. Stretching for miles, the cars blocked wildlife access to the river and marred the view of all who used the scenic canyon. Christo worked with Union Pacific Railroad and paid to get the cars moved. For several years, hundreds of thousands of boaters and motorists enjoyed sweeping canyon views, and wildlife moved unobstructed to the river.

- The State of Colorado Parks and Wildlife agency lacked robust data on the movement and life cycles of the bighorn sheep that have been introduced into the river canyon. The agency asked that Christo fund studies of the bighorn, but only in the immediate run-up to the project.



Author Lori Potter is an attorney who advised the "Over the River" team.

courtesy Lori Potter

Christo didn't wait to do the study or seek to avoid its costs. Instead, he voluntarily funded five years of data-gathering. Without being obligated to do so, he paid to capture and radio-collar bighorn sheep three times. He also voluntarily funded a new researcher to monitor the reams of unique bighorn data that poured in, for all five years.

- The state wildlife agency believed that bighorn sheep would use additional habitat in the river canyon if clearing of dense underbrush would make that acreage viable for sheep to use. Christo paid for Department of Corrections labor to spend months to clear brush and open up those new lands – again, without being obligated to conduct that work.

- Undaunted by those who said it couldn't be done, Christo contracted and paid for the first Environmental Impact Statement ever conducted on a work of art on federal lands. The approval in 2011 of a permit for the *Over The River* temporary work of art, a no-fee, non-commercial, non-ticketed event, open to all, showed for the first time that our federal public lands are as available for art as they are for mineral development, grazing, ski areas and the like. Was it only a coincidence that in 2016, on federal public land in Nevada, Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone installed *Seven Magic Mountains*, a free, open, temporary work of art in the desert?

- For the two decades that Christo and Jeanne-Claude worked in Colorado on "Over The River," the project engendered a lively discussion among all who heard of the artists' bold vision. What is art? What is the point of this art? Can a government agency say what art is, and "approve" it? And always, why do the artists do this? Intellectual sparks flew when opinions were traded. Most of us didn't have this type of discussion with our friends, neighbors and co-workers in any other context, and it stretched us.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude always dreamed of more projects than they were able to realize. Knowing that, they worked on several plans at any given time. Even as the planning and debate on "Over the River" continued (with the artists appearing at hundreds of public meetings and lectures in Colorado), they realized their iconic project "The Gates" in Central Park, New York City, in 2005. Christo also installed the "Big Air Package" in Germany in 2013, followed in 2016 by the "Floating Piers" in Italy. Each of those projects brought significant critical acclaim, economic benefit and public enthusiasm. Even if the gifts of "Over the River" are more subtle than the impacts of those projects, we benefit all the same.

Lori Potter is a Denver lawyer who advised the "Over the River" project team.