

A Sculpture's Sorry Saga

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When the Genesee Country Mall (now called "City Centre") was formally opened in 1976, the Main Street frontage was graced with a sculpture that immediately generated controversy lasting for years and eventually resulting in the object's removal to the Genesee Community College campus. The following monograph is a brief overview of this sorry saga.

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At some point in the design for the Mall, a decision was made to include a piece of sculpture that "people...could react to...feel a little delight in." The plans not only called for a sculpture, but also a pool, planters, and places to sit. In the words of the sculpture's designer, the intention was to bring "diversity and color [to] Main St." The hope was that people would find the arrangement "pleasant to be near." The designer further hoped that the sculpture itself would be something that "people [would] talk about when they [thought] of the mall." It was intended to be something representing "the newness and uniqueness of the mall."

People did, indeed, talk about the sculpture. But by-and-large, what they had to say was not what the creator envisioned. In fact, it generally was strongly negative. More about this response will follow, but first a few words about the process by which the sculpture came into being.

The design of the sculpture was undertaken by Duryea and Wilhelmi, a Syracuse design and planning firm. Henry Wilhelmi, a partner in the firm, initially appeared to take full credit for the design. In fact, at a ceremony for the Mall's opening, he reportedly wore a tag reading, "I designed the sculpture." However, years later, Wilhelmi offered a different explanation of how the sculpture was created, then describing it as the work of "several engineers [who] collaborated in arranging the flat surfaces and angles." Whatever the case, it should be noted that Wilhelmi, a landscape architect, was consistent in asserting that the sculpture was "not a commissioned artwork done by a professional artist."

Wilhelmi claimed that the sculpture's design was reviewed by city council members and other city officers before approval was given for its construction. He said a three-dimensional model was made available for this purpose. However, it appears that this review was probably part of a larger review for the Mall design as a whole, so it is not clear just how much attention was given to the sculpture itself.

Later, as controversy mounted over the sculpture, there was debate regarding exactly how much it had cost. The issue was complicated by the fact that it was included in a sum of \$24,000 that

was designated for not just the sculpture, but water and sewer lines, the concrete podium, a pool, benches, and foundation work. Evidently, the individual components of this work were not itemized. Given this fact, only an estimate of the cost of the sculpture was available, a figure judged to be between four and five thousand dollars.

Now, back to the reactions. Once the sculpture made its appearance, expressions of displeasure quickly followed. John Hodgins, a local artist and councilman was among the first to complain, saying he was “upset tremendously.” Hodgins observed that he had wanted local artists to be consulted on the design and usage of any art in and around the Mall.

Within a month, City Council was expressing a desire for the designer of the sculpture to “take it back.” Specifically, City Manager Ira Gates was directed by the Council to talk to Henry Wilhelmi to determine if the city could get at least part of the cost back. Council members, in the course of this meeting, noted that the sculpture had drawn critical remarks when it had been erected a month earlier. According to *The Daily News*, Council members themselves expressed varying degrees of dislike.

Efforts to return the sculpture and obtain a refund were unsuccessful and eight years later, the sculpture was still in the news and still raising ire. In April of 1984, Councilman Lee F. Allyn announced that he wanted the “work of art” replaced with a memorial to Vietnam veterans. The existing sculpture, he said, “never tells me anything.” Council President Bruce Tehan directed Assistant City Manager, William Reemtsen to investigate what removal would involve.

Allyn’s actions prompted *The Daily News* to invite public input. Readers were urged to submit their thoughts about the sculpture in letters to the paper. In particular, they were asked to indicate whether they thought it should be removed and whether it should be replaced by a memorial monument. In relatively short order, 29 letters were received.

The letters submitted to the newspaper were 3 to 1 in favor of removal. Only seven of the 29 letter writers wanted the sculpture to remain in place and some of them suggested changes to its appearance. Opponents to keeping the sculpture referred to it as a “monstrosity,” a “ridiculous hunk of metal,” and an “expensive eyesore,” among other things. One writer, learning that a similar sculpture had been well received in Illion, N.Y., wrote, “Send it to Ilion. If they ‘love one,’ they ought to adore two.”

Nothing significant came of Allyn’s recommendation or responses from readers of *The Daily News*. In fact, over the 15+ years that the sculpture stood outside the Mall, only two observations are worth noting. One, the fountain that was a key element in the original design was never turned on. And two, the color of the sculpture was ever changing. According to Wilhelmi, the art work was delivered with an orange primer that was to be given a top coat. It appears that the nature of the primer was overlooked and a topcoat wasn’t applied for many years. Then, depending on the accounts one reads, the sculpture was later painted at one time or another, blue, brown, and perhaps green.

Finally, in 1991, the construction of the Stuart Steiner Theatre at Genesee Community College set the stage for a final act in the sorry saga of the city’s sculpture. Feeling that the surroundings of the new theater were a little barren, and aware that the sculpture’s location in front of the Mall remained controversial, Dr. Steiner, acting as President of the College, contacted city officials

and offered a campus location. The offer was made with the stipulation that the city accept responsibility for both the delivery of the sculpture and its placement in the new location. Dr. Steiner doesn't recall the specific date that this occurred except that it was no more than two years after the theater was constructed. He does recall that city officials acted on his offer in just a matter of days, probably a reflection of how anxious they were to get rid of the sculpture.

The original campus placement of the sculpture was east of the theater between the theater and the main building. With the recent addition of the Rosalie "Roz" Steiner Art Gallery, it has been moved to a location just west of the theater around the corner of the building and back towards the Thruway.

Dr. Steiner reports that the sculpture continues to have detractors even in its new setting. There have been suggestions that it be "junked," but so far the sculpture continues to survive, an obvious monument to something. What that "something" is continues to elude most observers including the author of this monograph. One also wonders whether the sculpture might find yet a fourth location, perhaps next to the Thruway where it could thumb a ride back to Syracuse, hometown of its creator.

SOURCES

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