

Essay



Boulevard of broken art: These two L-shaped "rain curtain" sculptures at Golden State Plaza haven't been operational since about 2003.

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## When Public Art Fails

As the debate about public art and money reaches a fever pitch in Sacramento, part of the conversation needs to focus on the larger civic cost when this kind of art fails. Here's why the biggest public art failure in Sacramento's history may also be one of its greatest opportunities. **by Rob Turner**

constructed the Orwellian-sounding "East End Complex" on Capitol Avenue between 15th and 17th streets. Upon completion, it was the state's largest-ever office project (virtually the same cost as the arena when adjusted for inflation), and one that was roundly criticized for its design and lack of urban context at this critical gateway between Capitol Park and the liveliest section of midtown.

Because state projects are, incomprehensibly, immune to *all* local design review approvals, the buildings themselves were designed in a monolithic vocabulary, with imposing columns, mostly gray façades, and black—yes, black—windows that obscure all signs of life within. Worse, the massive structures empty out at 5 p.m., leaving behind a deserted concrete canyon on evenings and weekends. And with each passing year that the city blossoms around the periphery of this desolate complex, its emptiness is amplified. It's a deserted island in the middle of a bustling metropolis.

In the dozen years since its construction, it has, almost by design, repelled non-state workers from its boundaries like a Death Star force field. If the 28-story Renaissance Tower is colloquially known as the Darth Vader building, then the East End Complex is its more socially awkward little brother.

But for all its physical flaws, the government did do one thing right: It widened Capitol Avenue to allow for a more impact-

**One night this past March**, 54 citizens stood up in front of the Sacramento City Council to voice their opinions of the new artwork by Jeff Koons that will eventually find its place next to the new downtown arena. Legions more debated the issues on the Internet or with friends, family and colleagues. Suddenly, the city was overflowing with armchair art critics.

So where were they all in 2003?

That was the year when the State of California con-

ful viewing corridor of the State Capitol and, in that corridor, it set out to create a two-block-long plaza filled with the largest state-funded public art installation in California history.

Unfortunately, like the buildings that surround it, the plaza is filled with art that is equally oppressive, stark and uninviting. The result is a textbook example of how *not* to populate a space with art, and illustrates the even more dire consequences when such art is neglected by caretakers who are not curators.

The site, by any definition, is a public art failure as epic as the state it purports to honor. Allow me to elaborate.

According to a government catalog, the space in question is called Golden State Plaza, and it's divided into three distinct sections.

The first section, dubbed the "Zone of Public Gathering," sits on Capitol Avenue between 16th and 17th streets. It was designed to include an "inviting" public amphitheater, which has gone largely unused since it was created. The space is flanked by two 25-foot, L-shaped beams that were intended to "frame" the Capitol with dramatic "rain curtains"—aka falling water—that would emanate from said beams in an "abstract variation of traditional stage curtains."

The problem, however, is that the "rain" apparently hasn't fallen since soon after the artwork was completed in 2003. And unless the work has morphed into a performance piece designed to convey the story of our state's historic drought, the entire *raison d'être* of the massive beams was nullified almost from inception. According to the Department of General Services (DGS), which oversees all real estate holdings for the state, the water emanating from the piece flooded the plaza and sidewalk, and so has been turned off for nearly all of its 12 years of existence. And even if it worked as intended, the state wouldn't turn it on today anyway because of the drought, just as it hasn't turned on the historic Capitol fountain for many years.

Beyond the "rain curtains" lies the amphitheater which is, counter to the nature of amphitheaters, nearly always barren. On a beautiful weekday in May, not a single person sat on or near the steps, either to eat lunch or soak in the vista. And no wonder: The stone is hard, the steps are shallow and there's no shade to speak of. Frankly, even during non-drought years, a little flooding there wouldn't bother anybody.

The second section of the Golden State

Plaza is the "Zone of Discovery." Here, an artist placed 55 steel sculptures, each topped with layers of glass discs—intended to be illuminated at night—to reveal "images and texts that recount a fragmentary history of gold, as understood in the fields of science, politics and religion."

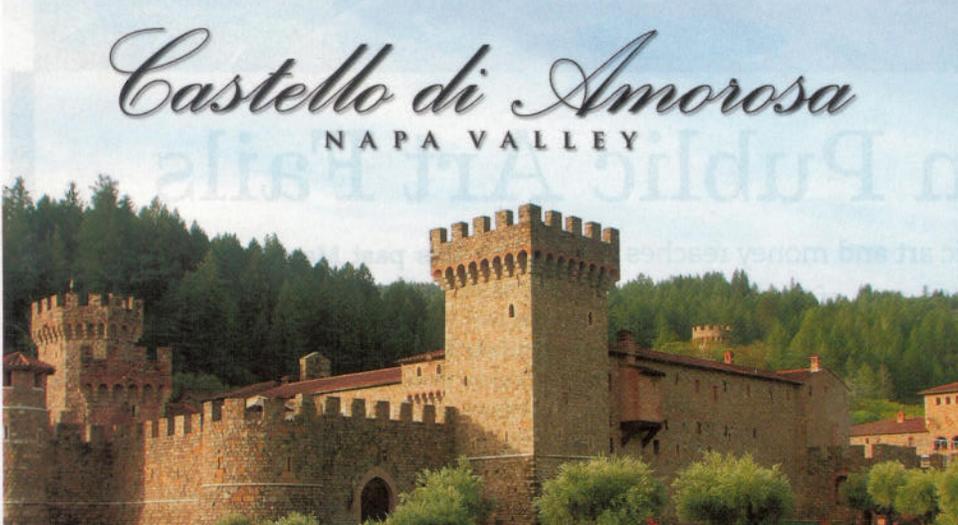
The first irony of being called the "Zone of Discovery" is that the scattered structures were originally placed on an uneven grass mound that prevented people with disabilities from "discovering" any of them at all.

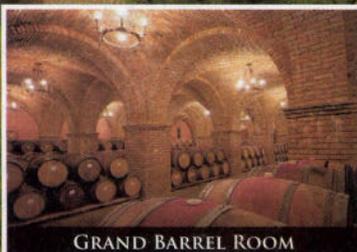
This oversight was noticed mere months after its debut, so the state spent \$50,000 to build a concrete pathway to increase access. But this "fix" only provided access to half of the—and I'm not making this up—"translucent sandwiches of human endeavor," as the state's catalog describes them. The other half of the pieces remain on the grassy knoll, which—again, *not making this up*—no one can actually view now because of the plentiful signs that warn visitors to "Please remain on designated path."

To make matters worse, the lights on all 55 translucent sandwiches no longer function and haven't for years, rendering them unreadable at night. The lack of illumination

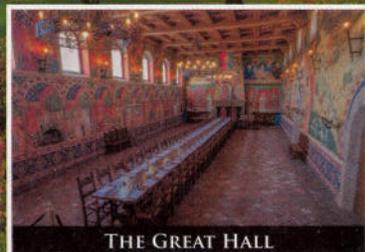
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is also a sad irony since they're spaced to represent the stars in the night sky on the day California became a state. They are, incidentally, virtually unreadable during the day as well, and not by accident. "Here and there, the text is obscured," explains the catalog. "Reading it is an impressionistic experience." In fact, in many cases, it's more impossible than impressionistic. One of the glass discs is completely shattered, another piece is damaged by graffiti dated from a year ago, and yet another sculpture is missing its translucent sandwich altogether.

The third and final section of Golden State Plaza is the "Zone of Transformation." This space features a long, sloping concrete bunker-like corridor through which visitors can walk. The interior contains what is known as an anamorph—an image that can *only* be seen when standing in a very precise spot, which is not marked. If, however, one were standing at the correct spot, one might be able to make out a vague image of scientist Edwin Hubble (or Edwin *Hubbel* as it's misspelled on the nearby plaque). What every visitor can see, however, are the scores of skateboard marks that have defiled the piece over the years.

Here, too, are more warning signs, these

reading, "Caution: Extremely slippery when wet or frosty."

Wet or not, this section may, in fact, be the least welcoming of them all. The long exterior surface of the corridor is nothing more than a solid concrete wall. That's what visitors see as they walk or drive by. It's about as welcoming as a drainage canal (though, apparently, it makes for a fantastic skateboard park).

Shelly Willis, the executive director of the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission, says that it's a strongly held belief among many of the most prominent arts and architecture leaders in Sacramento—including some who were involved in the original selection process itself—that the art in the plaza of the East End Complex has simply reached the end of its life cycle.

So where's the good news in all of this?

Willis explains that virtually all public art can be decommissioned and removed, and that this decision, while often difficult, is sometimes the best option for the community and, in some cases, the artists themselves, especially if the work has atrophied due to neglect or other circumstances.

Willis says she has decommissioned several public artworks in the city. "The idea or

the concept may be brilliant, but then it just doesn't manifest itself in the space in the way that it should," she explains. "Sometimes a work has its life, and that life ends."

When that happens, the state has the right "at any time and for any reason" to "remove the artwork" or "use the project site for other purposes," according to the contract provided to the East End Complex artists.

Decommissioning the artwork spanning the Golden State Plaza could, in fact, open this civically significant space to countless possibilities. Thanks to its stunning view of the Capitol, it could be one of the city's most desirable places to create an engaging environment—one that truly connects midtown to downtown in a meaningful way.

In 2005, the state turned control of Capitol Mall over to the city. Why not appeal to the state once again, and take ownership of the Golden State Plaza for the city, which already controls the adjacent streets?

Then, once the arena and Downtown Plaza are finished and brimming with new public art, the city can turn this blighted canyon into a blank canvas of creative potential.

Only then will the "Zone of Transformation" truly live up to its name. **S**

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