

No joy springs from fountain — neglected landmark is bone-dry

In a city proud of its counterculture history and progressive politics, a radical monument to rebellion has languished, uncared for and unloved, for most of its nearly 50-year existence.

The Vaillancourt Fountain is that cockeyed concrete tangle at the foot of Market Street on the edge of Justin Herman Plaza. The one that the late *Chronicle* architecture critic Allan Temko insisted must have been “deposited by a concrete dog with square intestines.” Art critic Alfred Frankenstein was far kinder, allowing that “its very outrageousness and extravagance are part of its challenge.”

There have been repeated calls for removal of the fountain over the years, all of which failed in the face of vigorous defense — not the least of which has come from sculptor Armand Vaillancourt, now 87. Meanwhile, pressure has lately grown to rename the plaza it dominates, given the

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Stephan Carter-Mason and a gull find dry Vaillancourt Fountain at Justin Herman Plaza a good place to perch.



FROM THE COVER

Vaillancourt Fountain a victim of neglect

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grave errors of judgment of which Justin Herman has been accused. As that potential controversy heats up, it seems a good time to review the plaza's most visible feature, and to consider its place in the city's heritage.

I was not at the unveiling of the Vaillancourt Fountain on April 21, 1971, but it happens that I was in San Francisco that spring, and the event was front-page news. There had been high-minded praise for the project: The noted landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, chief designer of the plaza and chairman of the jury that selected Canadian sculptor Vaillancourt, pronounced it "the first great monumental fountain in America."

But there was dissent, as well: The great San Francisco sculptor Ruth Asawa, no foe of advanced art, lamented that the best that could be said for the work was that its 710-ton mass and 30,000-gallon-per-minute roaring output of water would blot out the despised Embarcadero Freeway (which had not yet succumbed to the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake).

The opening was a zoo, with prominent speakers and noisy protesters competing for the attention of an audience of 2,000-3,000 "freaks, hips, straights, uptights and strung-outs," The Chronicle said. The director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art appeared on the dais, as did the then-director of UC Berkeley's art museum, Peter Selz, who had "the honor of being the first to fall in."

I came downtown to see what the fuss was about. By that time, I'm pretty sure, the legend "Québec Libre" had been removed. The artist — creator of numerous public sculptures with leftish political titles before and since — had stenciled the phrase in orange paint as he waded through the pool at the opening. The revolutionary impulse symbolized by that action seemed embodied and enlivened by his monumental work.

It was, after all, an officially commissioned public sculptural ensemble made to get wet in. It also seemed to me a deliberate poke in the eye of the burghers who ordered it up — an elaborate, ironic send-up of the monolithic freeway overpass.

By 1971, the idea that a work might require the participation of an audience to be complete was well ensconced in the contemporary art world. "Happenings," the name used by artist Allan Kaprow beginning in the late 1950s for live-art projects that combined aspects of music, dance, theater and visual art, had by a



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decade later come into use throughout youth culture for all manner of cultural celebrations.

Such an approach to permanent public sculpture was new, however, and Vaillancourt went all in. Frankenstein got it. He reported:

"There is a walkway of square steppingstones behind the principal jets, and following along it is like taking the famous walk behind Niagara Falls. But here you don't walk behind a single Niagara; you walk behind and around half a dozen, all pouring out their loads of water every which-way, with jets and little clouds of steam mixing in to complete the wet cave-like romanticism of the experience.

"Eventually there will be big walls of water pouring over the concrete walls at the back: lights and sprays and other pyrotechnical effects are programmed into the fountain and will presumably be used. But the heart of the idea is the unique one of public entry into and intimate exploration of the fountain's innards; in this it is unique and decidedly a success.

"It is not a great work of sculpture," he concluded, "which is like observing that an automobile is not much of a success as a horse."

I took a walk down Market Street recently to look again at the Vaillancourt Fountain. At the intersection with Battery Street, one passes the Mechanics Monument, a forceful tribute to labor by the great San Francisco sculptor and lover of

Youngsters stroll past arid Vaillancourt Fountain, above. Douglas Tilden's 1901 Mechanics Monument, below, is nearby.



men Douglas Tilden. It was originally erected, in 1901, as the center of a fountain, but the basin in which it stood was eliminated after the 1906 earthquake. The piece still stands at the same corner as an extraordinary work of art: gracefully modeled, righteous in intention. The pool, at best, was an attractive setting, likely not designed by the artist. The sculpture might even have been improved by bringing it closer to the viewer.

If you squint, you might see in Vaillancourt's work a reminder of the entwined forms of the Tilden monument, but the similarities stop there. The water is as essential to the one as it was superfluous to the other. Vaillancourt is a sprawling, lifeless skeleton in its current dry state, with a chain-link fence blocking the two sets of stairs that once allowed

people to peer down into the roiling maelstrom below. The chain of island-like steppingstones that made visitors feel they were walking on water is now a gantlet of precarious pedestals several feet above a rock-hard floor. The site is littered with trash.

On my visit I happened upon two Recreation and Park Department workers tinkering with electrical wires, who told me it has been "at least two years" since the fountain was running. That's just the latest of frequent extended dry spells.

Via email, I reached Rec and Park spokesman Elton Pon, who told me, "Crews are making preparations this week to test the working condition of the fountain. ... However, if, as expected, there are substantial capital costs beyond Rec and Park's or the Arts Commis-

sion's resources ... there are currently no plans to restore it."

There are many ways to destroy culture. The mid-century "redevelopment czar" and plaza namesake Justin Herman is being castigated, rightly, for the ignorance and de facto racism that led to displacement of families of color and the gutting of a significant part of San Francisco's material heritage. Erasing the memory of those mistakes will not recover what was lost. It could make it easier to fall again into the trap of arrogance.

Herman could not see that it is the life of a city that matters most, not the look of it. And we, perhaps, have yet to learn that it is the experience of works of art, not their raw components, that is of greatest value.

It makes little sense to spend money to add even a single new object to our civic art collection if we allow the virtual eradication, through neglect and obliviousness to its original intention, of our city's most visible public work. We are the heirs to a memorial that, encountered as it was designed to be, animates a moment in art and history that cannot be re-created. If our city agencies can understand that, their priorities should be as clear as the waters of a healthy Vaillancourt Fountain.

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