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Paging Ma Earth! Artwork for park is on line

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ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

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The two collaborators came to the public meetings with the usual tools: Power Point presentation, drawings and a written statement to convey their unusual ideas for an interactive, public art installation designed to energize a downtown San Diego park.

But when artists Po Shu Wang and Louise Bertelsen carefully unveiled their shiny round models, members of the city's Public Art Committee, who saw the proposal for the first time Thursday, seemed enchanted.

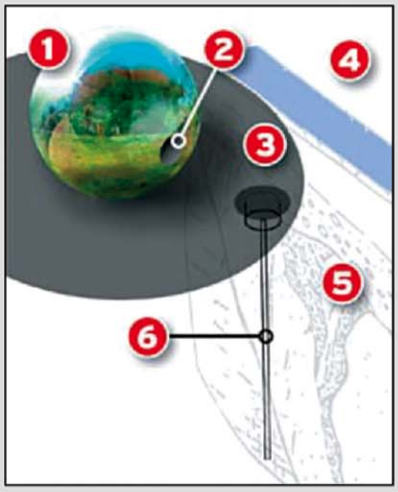
Instead of unveiling them with a flourish, the collaborating duo slowly slid two gleaming metal spheres, about 6 inches in diameter, out of the homemade equivalent of soft body stockings.

Then, Wang took one sphere apart to show miniaturized versions of low-and high-tech inner workings designed to enable visitors to "eavesdrop" and monitor the earthquake fault underlying the park, which will run along 14th Street between Island and J streets.

"You can come and look. It really works," he told the committee, referring to a viewfinder implanted inside for visually monitoring movement along the Rose Canyon fault.

Members of this Commission for Arts and Culture committee didn't need to inspect the models to endorse the proposal, which is not yet final, with enthusiasm and delight.

"Call Mother Earth!" said Randy Robbins, the committee's chairman and an architect who actively supports local visual arts events.



Listening to the earth

Po Shu Wang and Louise Bertelsen's public art piece would monitor the Rose Canyon earthquake fault. This detail of their multimedia project shows how visitors could "eavesdrop" on the Earth, using the fault line as a channel.

1. Stainless-steel sphere, 7 feet in diameter

2. Cone-shaped opening with loudspeaker wired to subterranean microphone

3. Manhole cover stamped with project info

4. Edge of playground lawn

5. Subterranean view of site

6. A pipe, containing a microphone, that reaches the earthquake fault

Robbins was referring to what is perhaps the most intriguing part of the proposal: electronic communications from the earthquake fault to people in the park or anywhere in the world.

Wang and Bertelsen were chosen from 22 California-based teams that applied for this commission. A panel that included art experts, an urban planner, an architect and Martin Poirier, the park's lead landscape architect, reviewed the entries. After interviewing three finalists, they selected Wang and Bertelsen in May.

The park "owes its existence to the fault line running beneath it, which makes it a no-build zone," Bertelsen said, reading from their proposal. She got a small laugh when she continued, "This is a serendipitous outcome of nature and culture negotiating for the best possible deal."

The artwork is designed to be beautiful as well as instructive.

Guided by a 2004 geotechnical report, the artists and the park's lead designer, Spurlock Poirier Landscape Architects of San Diego, have a good idea of the fault's location. Intrigued, both have creatively incorporated this subterranean diagonal fracture into their thinking and their designs.

From a distance, Wang and Bertelsen's proposed artwork would appear to be monumental sculptures: a pair of shiny, stainless-steel spheres measuring 7 feet in diameter and standing 50 feet apart. As visitors approach, they'd notice that the sphere placed in the park's playground is different in appearance and capabilities from its twin.

Essentially, the first sphere would serve as a vehicle for visitors to "eavesdrop" on the Earth. A small microphone lowered into a tube ending near the fault would transmit the sounds of typical, infinitesimal subterranean movement. The sound, which the artists would make audible to humans, could be heard in the park through a loudspeaker mounted inside a cone-shaped opening in the sphere.

In addition, they plan to use new cell-phone technology to connect the mike to an international communications system. People all over the world could "dial up" to hear what the artists call "fault whispers."

The artists, who work together under the name Living Lenses, want this art installation to resonate with people locally and globally. Just as this one fault line has local significance, it is also part of global techtonics.

They'd also like to complete this universal circle by inviting a national or international research group to install a seismometer. The artists' preliminary scientific and academic contacts expressed great interest because, they said, San Diego is lacking in such stations.

The second sphere wouldn't just be a giant bauble in the park. Visitors could look through an round opening in the "wired" sphere to see the second one perfectly framed. Over time, and this could take years, the earth will shift normally, displacing one or both spheres. The second sphere, viewed through the first, would go out of alignment.

These sculptural spheres will look like pearls to people looking down from tall buildings that are springing up around the park, Wang said during an interview. Their polished surfaces will also reflect the new East Village and the changing sky, Bertelsen added.

"The engineering and scientific side of San Diego has never done anything like this" to enlighten people about earthquake faults, Poirier said.

"It took artists to do it."