

City commission approves park artwork

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UNION-TRIBUNE ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

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'Cool!'

This exclamation – by an arts commissioner about a novel, science-based public art installation proposed for downtown San Diego – spoke volumes more than the city's Commission for Arts and Culture's unanimous approval of the project Friday.

Artists Po Shu Wang and Louise Bertelsen designed and are still refining details of this interactive artwork for a new East Village park. The Berkeley-based artists were chosen in May from 22 artist teams who sought this high-profile commission.

"People in San Diego have been very open and cooperative," Wang said, referring to residents, artists, art panels, technical advisers and other city staff members, after hearing of the commission's vote.

"It's what a team should be," Wang said of the broad spectrum of people involved. "You're in it together to creatively solve a problem." The monumental yet delicate artwork will attract visitors to the precise location of a minor earthquake fault beneath the park with a pair of gleaming, 8-foot-tall, stainless-steel spheres.

One sphere is to be equipped with a built-in speaker attached to a subterranean microphone positioned near the fault line to capture Earth's constant, normal murmurs. The artists are designing equipment to make the sounds audible to humans.

In addition, the artists want to incorporate a telephone line so that people anywhere could call and eavesdrop on this nanoslayer of the Earth's crust.

Mild waves of delighted laughter registered at the commission meeting, as Dana Springs, the city's public art program administrator, presented this groundbreaking project for the artists, who did not attend. The commission's Public Art Committee reviewed the final design Jan. 4 and recommended its approval.

"It is very cool," said Randy Robbins, a member of the Arts Commission and the public art committee chairman. He predicted park visitors and the commissioners will like the project even better after they see it installed and can experience it for themselves.

In addition to listening devices, the sphere will contain a lens for viewing its mate across the park. At first, the spheres will be in perfect alignment. But after years go by and the earth's soil shifts slightly, as it naturally does, the spheres will no longer line up. Call this "the movement of the spheres," as Springs did.

But the artwork probably won't be in place until later than previously expected, Springs said. Building the park is tied to the construction schedule of two neighboring residential towers being developed by Pinnacle International. Pinnacle's project could be delayed while going through the city's permitting process. The Pinnacle official overseeing the towers' construction and coordination with the park could not be reached for comment Friday. Some commissioners groaned when alerted to the potential delay.

In an interview, Springs said a gap of time between an artwork's approval and its installation isn't unusual, especially when it is integrated into larger, complex projects, such as new buildings and public places.

"Of the 19 public art projects that have been initiated since I joined the commission's staff in 2000, only two have been installed," Springs said. Others are in the pipeline.

Even before the city's financial problems were made public, projects typically took three to four years to be realized, she added.

The towers and park will share a "super-block" between 14th and 15th streets and Island and J streets. (Super-blocks are twice the size of typical downtown blocks.)

Both the park and Pinnacle's landscape plan were designed to be complementary by the San Diego firm of Spurlock Poirier Landscape Architects, which also worked with the artists.