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# 'This Equals that'

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## 'This Equals that'

County supports restoring prominent sculpture

By DANIEL STURM

When the state of Michigan quietly dismantled Michael Heizer's sculpture, "This Equals That," last year, it seemed like the end of the story. America's largest outdoor sculpture, whose steel armatures were flown in by helicopter during the late 1970s, had been long neglected, and was now being boxed away.

Shortly before leaving office, Republican Gov. John Engler approved dismantling the sculpture, purchased 24 years ago for \$540,00. The state cited water damage to the underground parking lot beneath it as the reason. Given its \$1 billion budget deficit, the restoration of the sculpture any time in the near future seemed unlikely. The state Department for Management and Budget said in November that \$1 million would be needed for the restoration process.

One Lansing State Journal guest columnist, retired reporter John Albright, suggested trucking the artwork to a landfill, to avoid the warehouse costs—advice the State of Michigan appeared to take literally. The gunite shell of Heizer's sculpture was removed and destroyed during the dismantling. The remaining steel framework was wrapped in flimsy plastic and set out on a marshy meadow at the Michigan Department of Transportation Repair Center in Mason. The framework's exposure would damage it perhaps irreparably within one winter, one art preservation expert predicted.

But it's perhaps too early to write an obituary on "This Equals That."

While the state appeared willing to let the piece rust, Ingham County has been more proactive. On Feb. 10, the Board of Commissioners adopted a resolution supporting the restoration of Heizer's sculpture.

Commissioner Chris Swope, who chairs the committee that brought the resolution to the attention of the full board, said he feels the sculpture should without question be restored because it represents an important part of Ingham County's public arts heritage.

The resolution, which was also sent to Gov. Jennifer Granholm's office, suggests rebuilding the sculpture using a permanent surface material, such as cor-ten steel, plate copper, or aluminum alloy, and placing it "on a well-wrought plaza in downtown Lansing across from Oldsmobile Park."

Swope said the board adopted the resolution after receiving a letter from Haslett resident Richard Harrington asking the commissioners to take a stand.

Copper on a sea of green glass

In a telephone interview, Harrington said he supports the restoration of the Heizer sculpture because he thinks it is an excellent piece of art. Harrington, who is a sculptor himself, pointed out that he wouldn't accept budget problems as an excuse for not beginning the restoration. Harrington, 51, a Michigan native, sent letters to the state Department of Management and Budget; the Department for History, Arts and Library; the state attorney general; Lansing City Council; and the Board of Commissioners.

Harrington said that the site chosen by the arts commission in the 1970s, west of the State Capitol, wasn't ideal because it was hidden from public view. Sheltered by two five-story buildings, the plaza was unused by pedestrians and invisible to drivers passing by. "Even state workers entered the buildings from the parking structure below," Harrington said.

Harrington proposes that the City of Lansing lease the state property across from Oldsmobile Park used as a parking lot. The state should construct a solid, well-wrought, intrinsically beautiful plaza, he elaborated, and the Heizer sculpture should be reconstructed in copper.

Harrington noted that permanent, native Michigan copper contain beautiful chromes, from bright to mossy green. Because it was a natural resource of Michigan, money spent would be invested into the state economy. Using copper would protect the artwork against the impact of weather, while the original gunite surface had deteriorated more easily.

The location across from Oldsmobile Park would offer excellent vehicular and pedestrian views, Harrington said. "'This Equals That,' expertly restored in copper, sited alone on a solid plaza with ample space and in full public view, will be a jewel for the people of Michigan for years to come," he wrote in a recent letter to Heizer, who resides in Hiko, Nev.

Harrington suggests surfacing the plaza in green glass, made from recycled bottles, which are not accepted in the county's recycling program. "Copper on a sea of green glass would be stunning," he said.

While state officials have repeatedly said that a restoration wasn't feasible in the near future, there are now signs indicating that this attitude may have changed. William Anderson, the director of the state Department for History, Arts and Library, said in a telephone interview last week that the preservation of the Heizer sculpture was being given "priority," a term he had not used in previous conversations. And he had three new pieces of news to share relating to the artwork's fate.

First, the Department of Management and Budget had assured him that "This Equals That" was now well protected from the elements. In November 2003 the metal framework of the sculpture (which was not designed to withstand direct exposure to the elements) had been almost entirely unprotected. Plastic that meant to protect it was mostly ripped off and was flapping loosely from the base of the piece. Currently, the steel framework is still stored outside.

Anderson's second piece of good news was that the sculpture might soon be transferred to an indoor location. The state is in discussion with a donor who has offered the possibility of storing the one-half acre public sculpture in a warehouse.

Anderson also said he plans to invite a group of people, including members of the special arts commission and benefactors, to discuss "how we could come up with a plan to restore the piece, and where it might be located."

A quiet demise

Four members of the original arts commission that selected Heizer said they were concerned about the disrespect shown toward Heizer's work. They also wondered how the State of Michigan could remove the piece without first discussing it with the artist or the public.

There's some evidence that taste may have played a role in the decision. John Truscott, a former press secretary to Engler, commented in a radio interview on WKAR in December that he had always disliked the sculpture. "It looked like something that an elementary school kid could have done," Truscott said. "It didn't have much finesse. And most people just didn't get it." Truscott said when he heard that the sculpture was going to be dismantled, he and several friends exchanged e-mails jokingly discussing how they might discard the pieces, suggesting concrete burials for road projects, or using it as a marine sanctuary reef. Truscott suggested auctioning the sculpture on Ebay or a state

Web site.

Mary Ann Keeler, vice chairwoman of the Special Arts Commission appointed in 1975 by former Gov. William Milliken that selected Heizer, didn't see anything to laugh about. The dedicated philanthropist from Grand Rapids said that she was "furious" about former Gov. John Engler's approval of the action. "There's money to take it down, but none to put it back up," Keeler said.

Keeler and her late husband, Miner S. Keeler, have been large beneficiaries of the arts. In the last several years, they generously donated to several libraries, museums, and health organizations in Michigan, including their most recent gift, of \$1 million to Grand Rapids' Grand Valley State University, for a library. President George H.W. Bush appointed Mrs. Keeler to the President's Advisory Committee on the Arts.

When pressed to explain why there were no immediate plans for restoration, state officials claimed that providing money for this would be a huge obstacle. State records, however, show that the state had fewer problems funding the dismantling, on which Michigan spent \$593,157, according to records City Pulse obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

Although a final breakdown of all costs wasn't available, a cost estimate by Christman, the construction company that was hired, reveals that \$272,000 was estimated for demolition and steel salvage. An additional \$160,000 was estimated for design, project management, contingency and fees. Finally, the plaza restoration would cost the state \$45,000.

If Harrington's proposal isn't instigated, there's another Michigan resident who says he would like to take on the cause of "This Equals That." St. Johns resident Jim "Peppermint" Crosby said he has a good plan for the restoration of the sculpture. Crosby, who owns Crosby Mint Farms, is planning to create a two-acre community park and says he is searching for a major piece of public art. The park, which he says would be large enough to accommodate 1,500 people, would be open to community groups and private organizations for theater plays, concerts, pow wows, family reunions, weddings, and educational events.

A Lakota Indian woman who is an employee of Crosby triggered the farmer's interest in the idea. Crosby said she told him she had developed a spiritual relationship to the sculpture after seeing photos of the monumental artwork in City Pulse. She contacted her elders in Minnesota, who advised that the sculpture should be saved.

Crosby said he strongly believes in preservation, education and cultural diversity. The mint farmer said he wants to explore the Heizer restoration idea carefully and then plans to contact Heizer. "This sculpture has so much character. We really need to preserve it," he said.

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