

# Concord Journal; Wherein Public Art Doesn't Please

By KATHERINE BISHOP, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES  
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LEAD: In recent years this city 25 miles east of San Francisco has been sucked inexorably into the Los Angelization of the Bay Area. Once a sleepy backwater, it is now a city of 112,000 people, its freeways clogged with commuters, its downtown of genteel covered walkways dominated by looming office buildings.

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Rather than bemoan its fate, the city has built "Heritage Gateway," a "monument to Concord's past and a symbol of future prosperity," on five traffic islands along a busy thoroughfare into town. There is a lone oak tree, the symbol of community for the Ohlone Indians, who originally lived here; there are flowering fruit trees in memory of the agriculture of early settlers; there are formal gardens recalling the natural beauty of the area. So far, no problem. But then there are the two islands displaying 91 shining aluminum poles stretching 8 to 50 feet high into pointed tips - a sculpture symbolizing both "the advent of modern technology" and the ceremonial poles of the ancient Ohlone "spirit place."

Now you've got art. And as far as citizens here are concerned, that starts with A, and that rhymes with J, and that stands for junk.

They are so enraged that \$100,000 in public money has been spent for what they consider an eyesore that an overwhelming majority of those responding to a city survey now say they want the work demolished.

The work, "Spirit Poles," was commissioned and financed by the City Council in 1988 after the sculptor, Gary Rieveschl of East Hampton, L.I., won a design competition sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. Completed last October, it recently won another competition: a reader contest by The National Enquirer to select "the ugliest publicly funded sculpture in America." It beat out an assemblage of large steel plates connected by telephone poles in Huron, S.D., and a sculpture made of crushed autos in Detroit.

At Lou's Barber Shop, Lou (who would not give his last name) said his customers spoke of little else. "People are ready to cut it down themselves," he said. "They are upset. They call it all kinds of things." Things like "porcupine plaza." And Mayor Byron Campbell,

whose attack on the work helped elect him last year, said "Spirit Poles" was often likened to a bunch of knitting needles or punji sticks.

Mr. Rieveschl declined to comment. But his official statement to the City Arts Committee makes it clear that the uproar did not come as a surprise. "A proposal that fails to create any controversy," he said, "has also failed to animate the healthy public debate which lies at the root of our democratic process."

The conflict is not simply one of the enlightened versus the Philistines. Dr. Galen Crazz, an associate professor of architecture at the University of California at Berkeley who teaches a course entitled "Public Space and Public Art," said the public often sought public art for decorative purposes to draw attention from otherwise dismal surroundings. When it does not serve that purpose, she said, people get angry.

"Public art is compensation for less than ideal urban development," she said. "The position of art in this whole culture is compensation for ugliness elsewhere." The question for both the artist and those designated to choose the art, she went on, is, "Do you appeal to the current level of cultural evolution or do you do something that pushes it?"

At least one person here is willing to depart from the consensus against the sculpture. Robert L. Martin, the bartender at TR's Bar and Grill, whose windows look directly onto the work, said: "I sure like it. It takes a lot of courage for a town to put something up that's that avant-garde. Maybe people just don't understand it." (Let it be noted that Mr. Martin attended art school near Los Angeles.

He does not live in Concord.)

The California Art Preservation Act says works of "fine art" may not be removed without the written permission of the artist. So Mayor Campbell said he would negotiate with Mr. Rieveschl to reach "a mutually satisfactory arrangement."

And what has this city learned from the experience? "If you choose public art," Mayor Campbell said, "you damn well better be right!"