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Urban Pulse

NEWS STORY

Urban Mythology

As the city prepares to take down the Lovejoy Ramp, fans of the Greek murals beneath it fight to preserve them as a reminder of the Pearl District's swiftly changing history.

BY KAREN E. STEEN
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The murals were restored in 1972 by the Portland Arts Commission.

Right now, many of the murals are not visible. Hoyt Street Properties has wrapped the columns in rigid insulation to protect them from nearby construction.

"An 800-year-old shard of pottery is no longer useful, but the painting on it is," says James Harrison. "This so-called 'useless art' can save the mighty columns--that's what makes art powerful."

The River District development plan includes three new park blocks. Many feel this would be a natural location for the restored columns.

James Harrison says that saving the columns provides a historical context for the Pearl District as it changes. "There's a lot of archaeology in

When the Pearl District's 72-year-old Lovejoy Ramp comes down this summer, most people will care only how the change affects their commute. But a handful of Portlanders will be more worried about the ghost of Tom Stefopoulos.

Stefopoulos was a sign painter and Greek immigrant who worked as a watchman at a railroad crossing near the ramp in the 1940s. Between trains, he painted murals on 10 of the columns that support the ramp. Renegade art that was never commissioned or approved, the works depict Greek myths and historical figures like the Greek philosopher Diogenes--commanding images with a legendary power to charm the people who have seen them.

"Members of the community have always loved those columns," says the Portland Department of Transportation's Vicky Diede, who is managing the ramp's removal as part of the River District redevelopment project. "They keep watch of them and make sure that they're not being vandalized." They also intervened several years ago when volunteers with the city Maintenance Bureau painted over some of the murals, mistaking them for graffiti.

Now, with ramp demolition planned for mid-July, Portlanders are once again rushing to the columns' defense, this time with a plan to remove and re-erect them as public art. But what makes the columns so appealing--being unofficial works in an unexpected place--is what makes saving them difficult: Who owns uncommissioned public art? What is the process for preserving it? And where does the money to do it come from?

So far, the most active of the column-huggers are about as official as Stefopoulos' murals were in the first place. Architecture and design firm RIGGA has been advocating the preservation of the columns for over a

that area," he says. "Foreground it. Don't pretend it's a blank slate."

The columns under the Lovejoy Ramp were memorialized once before: in the opening shots of Gus Van Sant's 1989 film *Drugstore Cowboy*.

year. "Our duty as artists is to make these columns current," says RIGGA's James Harrison. "We want to take something that's no longer useful one way and give it a new function as art."

Harrison and his partners have volunteered hundreds of hours researching ways to protect the columns during demolition, store them safely and then re-erect them. Art conservator Claire Dean has also donated many hours to a professional assessment of the columns. "They're truly urban folk art," Dean says. "[Stefopoulos] was making art in his environment...that urban landscape."

Harrison and Dean have won allies in the parks department, the Portland Development Commission, the Regional Arts and Culture Council and the mayor's office. But the columns are currently managed by the city transportation department, and art preservation is not its focus. Although PDOT has required the demolition contractor to save the columns, it hasn't indicated how it should be done.

RIGGA, Dean, the arts and culture council and others have stressed the importance of certain requirements, such as encasing the columns during demolition, keeping the bases and crowns of the columns intact and having a professional art conservator on site.

But PDOT isn't making any promises. Diede cites two reasons: liability and feasibility. First, she says, demolition methods must remain in the hands of the contractor. "If we dictated what the process should be...we're liable, not them," she explains. Diede also says it must be left up to the contractor to decide whether saving the bases and tops of the columns is physically feasible. RIGGA has consulted with demolition experts who say it is possible, just more costly--and that could be obstacle enough.

Another concern is that PDOT has not built in substantial incentives to protect the columns. If the columns are damaged beyond repair, the contractor will be liable for \$4,000 per column. Instead of having the value of the columns assessed by an art expert, PDOT figured an increase over what engineers estimated it would cost to cut the columns free from the ramp (\$1,500 each). But with the total demolition contract estimated at \$919,000, that's a minimal penalty. In theory, the contractor could demolish all 10 columns, owe \$40,000 in penalties but save \$15,000, thereby losing only \$25,000 (or less than 4 percent of the total contract).

On Friday, the column-huggers received what looked to be good news when the "apparent winner" of the demolition contract was announced. The winning low bid, by Staton Company of Eugene, was \$175,000 under budget, which could leave funds for implementing the preservationists' recommendations. But according to Diede, the next-lowest bid was \$300,000 higher, meaning PDOT must now carefully evaluate Staton's proposal to make sure it is feasible. Meanwhile, there is no money budgeted for what happens after the demolition: the restoration and re-erection of the columns, which RIGGA estimates will cost another \$750,000. As *WW* noted in 1995, the original ramp-

demolition budget included \$22,400 for preserving the murals. But inflation has increased other costs, Diede says, forcing the city to eliminate this item from the budget.

Art conservator Dean, who in 1995 managed the restoration of the Astoria Column, a 125-foot outdoor pillar painted with scenes of Oregon history, says a nonprofit organization could raise money for the columns. "From the very beginning I've been trying to push this idea that we need to have a sort of Friends of the Lovejoy Ramp," she says.

Luckily, the columns have some powerful friends already, including the Pearl District Neighborhood Association, Portland's Greek community, developer Homer Williams and Mayor Katz. "This is in the urban renewal district, where there's a lot of construction going on. We may be able to capture some Percent for Art [funding]," Katz points out. "I do believe that we ought to save those columns. We'll see what we can do."

But the most powerful friend of the columns may be a man who's been dead for 28 years, a protector who's as mythological as the murals themselves. Recently, a call for information about the columns in the art and culture council's newsletter yielded a photo of Tom Stefopoulos.

"The myth is that some transient guy painted these things, but you see him in this picture, and he's a very proud-looking man," Harrison says. "He's holding a stop sign. It's like his ghost came back to save the columns."

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