

The fate of a fountain

State will decide what's next for Capitol Campus creation that's been out of commission for years

"I wished they won't take this place away. It has been a restful area for most of us here," said Pat Reda, who works for the administrative offices at the Department of Employment Services, of the Halprin Fountain area while taking a lunch break near its entrance Friday.



Ron Soliman/ The Olympian

KRISTIN ALEXANDER FOR THE OLYMPIAN
OLYMPIA -- Sam Calhoon's favorite hangout is a dry fountain on the Capitol grounds.

An internationally known landscape architect built the fountain long before Calhoon was born. Today, Lawrence Halprin's "Water Garden" is waterless -- permanently shut off since 1992, when state groundskeepers discovered it was leaking.

online help

- Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, winter 2004 newsletter:**
www.oahp.wa.gov/pages/Documents/documents/December2004.pdf
- General Administration, "Water Garden":**
www.ga.wa.gov/visitor/WaterGarden/Garden.htm
- General Administration, campus improvements:**
www.ga.wa.gov/campus/update.html

To some, the concrete remains are a refuge. To others, an eyesore.

To Calhoon, 14, it is the best playground in town. He and his friends have frequented the site - which they dubbed "The Stone Garden" and "The Maze" -- for at least two years.

Now the state must decide what to do about the fountain, located on the brick plaza near the rear of the state Employment Security and Transportation departments.

Plans call for its removal in 2006 as part of a project to redesign the East Campus and repair the roof of the underlying parking garage. But reconsideration is being given after concerns were raised by some state workers and a former member of an architectural firm close to the project.

Restoring the fountain would cost about \$1.6 million -- almost twice the price of removal, according to a report by EDAW, the landscape architecture firm hired for the campus redesign.

Department of General Administration staff requested two new studies last fall that consider restoration costs and public opinions.

A subcommittee of the Capitol Campus Design Advisory Committee reviewed the reports Dec.

17 and expressed support for restoration.

The advisory committee is expected to make a recommendation this winter to the State Capitol Committee, which has the final say.

Halprin, now 88 and still working, favors restoration but understands the concerns.

"It's a little egotistical for me to say they have to improve it because this is a wonderful thing I did and people have to take care of it. That's how I feel," he said. "On the other hand, it's not up to me to say people need to invest that amount of money. It's up to them to decide whether it's an important thing in their lives and worth preserving for them, their children, their grandchildren."

"Water Garden" spans more than 15,000 square feet. Entrances lead to a private setting out of view from passers-by. Concrete walls of various heights dominate the space. Once pools and basins, the forms are now weathered and partially covered by vines. Rhododendron bushes, ornamental berries and a few invasive plants hug the paths. Squirrels and birds dart among the oak, maple, ash and pine trees that provide a lush canopy during spring and summer.

A few cigarette butts serve as evidence that state workers use the grounds for smoke breaks, as well as meditation, reading and the occasional staff meeting.

Department of Transportation employees Fred Wepfer and Monique Glick examined the empty basins on a sunny afternoon before the holidays. Wepfer described to Glick how the water looked when it ran over the concrete.

"I liked it," Wepfer said. "It broke up the monotony of Red Square. It was fairly peaceful."

The garden takes on a new life Friday evenings, when Calhoon and other students from Olympia High School converge there for a hide-and-seek game called "Forty-Forty."

Calhoon doesn't want the state to remove the fountain or turn it back on.

"It would ruin our tradition of coming here every Friday since forever," he said.

The Olympia Arts Commission and the South Capitol Neighborhood Association sent letters supporting the fountain's restoration. American Society of Landscape Architects chapters in Washington and Northern California also wrote to urge the state to consider preserving the fountain.

Many of those who have found enjoyment there, as well as critics, were unaware until recently that the concrete structures were once a fountain, much less the work of an award-winning architect.

A report by the state Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation and the Washington State Arts Commission favors restoration. Commissioned by General Administration, it provides a historical perspective about Halprin's work and includes public comments.

Donovan Gray, an author of the report, solicited opinions from state workers in the vicinity of the fountain. About 80 percent of the 159 employees who responded indicated a desire to see the fountain restored, while 13 percent felt it should be removed.

Restoration proponents described the functioning fountain as a "gentle respite," "sanctuary"

and "oasis in the middle of all this concrete and brick." Others said the existing garden is peaceful and serves as a shady escape from summer heat.

Those favoring removal cited safety issues, including the possibility of children being injured during play and fear that a malicious person might lurk there. Other impressions were that the decrepit fountain simply isn't attractive. Workers described it as a "sad-looking thing" and "oppressive."

Bob Cox works at the Capitol Visitor Center. He's well-informed about campus artwork and was involved in construction of the Korean War Memorial. But Cox had little positive to say about Halprin's fountain.

"I think it served its purpose and it's time to move on," he said.

The Capitol Campus Committee initially approved a design that calls for the fountain's removal and construction of an open space with tree-lined paths. Existing trees need to be removed regardless of whether the fountain stays in order to repair the garage roof, said project coordinators.

The approved design was "intended to be a softer, more welcome arrangement of features and landscape," said MaryGrace Jennings, cultural resources manager with General Administration.

Rick LeBrasseur, a former design consultant with EDAW, criticized the state's decision to remove the fountain in a June 2003 article published in Landscape Architecture magazine. He was pleased to learn that the state is giving the fountain further consideration.

"It was during my site visits that I realized the historical significance and cultural importance, not to mention the innate beauty, of this piece of work," LeBrasseur said.

Jack MaGuire, General Administration's lead for the East Campus construction project, said his opinion has shifted as he's learned more about Halprin's contributions to landscape design.

"I used to be dead-set on, 'Let's get rid of this,' " MaGuire said. "Now I'm straddling the fence."

Jennings said staff members are preparing an estimate of ongoing maintenance costs should the fountain be restored.

"We're going to have kids that will put dish soap in it and blue dye. It happens across the street (in Tivoli fountain)," MaGuire said.

<http://www.theolympian.com/home/news/20050123/living/74116.shtml>

Author's note: This story was submitted in 2004 but published by the newspaper in 2005. As a result, references to "last year" should be 2003.

Sidebar:

Supporters of architect's work hope his vision is saved

KRISTIN ALEXANDER FOR THE OLYMPIAN

Lawrence Halprin had earned the distinction of being the nation's premier landscape architect when he was chosen in 1967 to construct "Water Garden" on the Washington Capitol grounds.

Halprin designed hundreds of projects worldwide, including Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the Haas Promenade, which overlooks the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

Northwest works include Seattle's Freeway Park, the Seattle World's Fair design, Portland's Lovejoy and Ira Keller fountains, the Portland Transit Mall and the Washington Water Power campus in Spokane.

He received the National Medal of Arts in 2002.

Halprin felt that a pool or fountain would help break up the Capitol's expansive East Campus plaza. He designed "Water Garden" to be interactive and convey the feeling of water tumbling down a mountainside.

"We wanted it to be something that would induce people to participate in it," he said, "to walk in the water, to feel the water, to have their children come and play with the water and immerse themselves in it."

Gov. Dan Evans was in support of "Water Garden." But the project faced strong challenges from then-Lt. Gov. John Cherberg, who was concerned about its \$250,000 price and "the likelihood of attracting 'hippies' who might bathe or loiter there," according to information on General Administration's Web site.

Despite concerns, the Capitol Campus Committee approved the design and the fountain was completed in 1972. The cascading water drew visitors and state workers until 1992, when the fountain was turned off because of leaking.

"Water Garden" was scheduled for removal in 2006. But now the state is considering whether it should be saved.

Halprin hopes the fountain will be restored. Ongoing preventive maintenance is important, he said.

"It's like a car -- if you don't take care of it, you have to buy a new one," he said.

In a way, the controversy surrounding "Water Garden" is a microcosm of a greater trend. As other Halprin works around the country have deteriorated and become unfashionable in the eye of critics, several communities have sought to destroy them. At the same time, a grassroots movement has sprung up among those interested in preserving these designs.

Last year, Skyline Park in Denver became the first major Halprin work to be demolished, although part of the original design was retained.

Susan Barnes-Gelt, a Denver city councilwoman, was quoted by The New York Times as saying: "Denverites do not warm up to modernism. ... Halprin's aesthetic was not respected or

frankly, enjoyed."

Charles Birnbaum, coordinator of the National Park Service Historic Landscape Initiative, founded the Cultural Landscape Foundation to respond to threats posed to works created by Halprin and other modernist designers. He believes they are part of our national heritage.

Birnbaum is concerned not only about destruction of these landscapes, but also neglect and attempts to alter the design without consideration of the architect's intent.

"When fountains get designed and then they get turned off, they lose their intent. It's like saying, 'Here's a gorgeous perennial garden, but now we're going to leave mulch there,' " he said.

Seattle is now considering renovations of its parks.

A privately funded initiative is helping preserve Halprin-designed parks in Portland.

John Russell, a local real estate developer whose offices overlook the parks, retained Urbsworks, a Portland architecture firm, to develop a plan for restoring the parks. He paid to have trees trimmed and successfully pushed for a \$1 million city renovation of the Keller fountain in 1996.

Urbsworks President Marcy McInelly said a long-term goal is to create a conservancy organization to maintain, enhance and build appreciation for Halprin landscapes.

"Part of making Portland's parks better is helping people realize the history behind them," McInelly said.

At age 88, Halprin still practices from his office in San Francisco. He's developing a landscape for the new Lucas Film campus at the Presidio in San Francisco, as well as an area surrounding Yosemite National Park's falls.

Halprin said he's retained the same focus toward landscape architecture that he developed in the 1960s. If anything, his beliefs are stronger.

His wife, Anna, is a dance choreographer. Her art has inspired his.

"I think constantly of these pieces I make as pieces of theater, and what we're designing is the choreography for the people to enjoy," he said.

<http://www.theolympian.com/home/news/20050123/living/74117.shtml>

Author's note: This story was submitted in 2004 but published by the newspaper in 2005. As a result, references to "last year" should be 2003.