



Walkabout: Crosstown Expressway plan endangers mosaic mural



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A park capping the Crosstown Expressway has the funding it needs for construction to begin next spring, and if ground is actually broken next spring and results in easy pedestrian access from Downtown to the Lower Hill District while I can still walk, glory hallelujah.

That would only be four years since a federal design grant — pretty quick considering how long the 28 acres at the former Civic Arena site will take to redevelop.

There is one little hitch, though.



A pedestrian tunnel burrows under the ramp that takes traffic up to Bigelow Boulevard. It is in a trough of land behind the DoubleTree Hotel and would be filled in to create the cap.

On each wall of this tunnel are colorful mosaic panels of pieces of stained and painted glass arranged in textured concrete, 36 panels that sparkle when shafts of sunlight come through.

Created by the late sculptor and muralist Virgil Cantini, it was installed in 1964 as a piece of public art that harked to subway murals in Europe.

Brittany Reilly, founder of Design Nation, and filmmaker Will Zavala met me in the tunnel recently to bring it to public attention. We will all find out together how hard it will be to extract the panels, how many it is possible to save, how many might end up in the park over the Crosstown and what other options exist for display.

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Ms. Reilly's mission is to program events for public appreciation of modernist art, and she recognizes the challenge the city has, she said. The panels are abstract, not one specifically dependent on another, but they were designed by an artist whose vision for the site was comprehensive.

"There's linear movement and flow" to the work, a complement to the idea of a pedestrian passageway, she said. "Saving just one or two feels like a consolation prize."

Ms. Reilly is conducting a public tour of Mr. Cantini's works — sculpture, murals, enamels and fiber work — throughout Oakland and Downtown on Saturday. The tunnel mural is the last stop on the tour.

Buses depart at 1:30 p.m. from 5700 Bunker Hill St., Highland Park, and will return to that site for a reception at 5 p.m., featuring a screening of Mr. Zavala's film about Mr. Cantini, "The Artist In Public," which he made for the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts shortly before Mr. Cantini's death in 2009.

The cost of the tour and reception is \$60. Reserve a ticket at cantini.eventbrite.com or by calling 412-613-0993.

The artist described his design of the work in the tunnel, which is not named, in part as follows: "The art is supposed to lend a feeling of movement, not of a specific image. I want to give an experience of sensing the city — both day and night ... gold and silver will shimmer like the lights of the city.

"By spacing the mosaics, I hoped to create the idea of a strata cut into the earth, the city growing out of the earth and not bound by a frame."

For many months, landscape architects, artists, city officials, art advocates and others have been planning the park, which represents a pretty big-deal moment for our time.

Planning director Ray Gastil, a Seattle native, equated it to his hometown's "transformative freeway park. It's a great achievement that we got the resources for this."

The total project budget is an estimated \$27 million.

It would cost between \$5,000-\$6,000 to remove each panel, with no guarantees that the work won't shatter, Mr. Gastil said.

The design for the new park has made room for a few — two or three, maybe four — of the 36 panels. The design team and city have discussed options with Mr. Cantini's family.

“Obviously we encourage [them] to try and remove as many of the mosaics as possible, but, as usual it all comes down to money,” said Lisa Cantini-Seguin, Mr. Cantini's daughter.

The tunnel was built with a \$60,000 federal grant to be a pedestrian connection between Chatham Street and Seventh Avenue. No one apparently was thinking about easy pedestrian access to and from the Hill District, which takes some fortitude against an emotional impasse made worse by merging, converging and the roaring of traffic.

A park capping the Crosstown will solve the impasse, muffle the noise of traffic and — with some good luck, maybe an angel, maybe a nice surprise, a light-bulb idea — offer room for Mr. Cantini's mural to sparkle, as complete as possible, out in the open.

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