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OPEN FORUM

# Save the Vaillancourt Fountain — and S.F.’s modernist history

By Ted Barrow

San Francisco officials seem intent on destroying the Vaillancourt Fountain — one of its architectural and artistic treasures.

As he intended, Armand Vaillancourt’s Brutalist fountain has always provoked debate. To destroy it, however, would be to obliterate the last truly insurgent modernist voice left in the Embarcadero Plaza complex.

The fountain, the plaza and the Embarcadero Center were built in an era when San Francisco optimistically invested in challenging its residents through novel spaces and provocative artworks. Landscape architect Lawrence Halprin is widely considered one of the 20th century’s most daring choreographers of civic life, creating spaces for dynamic art that could spark wonder and play. He and Vaillancourt didn’t design for passive spectators. They built a civic stage that demanded movement and curiosity. In an era when many Americans fled the city for the suburbs, Embarcadero Plaza and the fountain were a brash plea for urban cosmopolitanism.

While some canonical works of modernist landscape architecture are cherished and preserved — like Thomas Church’s 1948 Donnell Gardens in Sonoma County or the souriant granite plaza and fountains that lead to Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson’s 1958 Seagram Building in New York — urban public works like Embarcadero Plaza have remained controversial.

Embarcadero Plaza is Donnell’s urban cousin, a truly public space unlike corporate plazas on Park Avenue. Ours is in brusque concrete and brick, unlike the polished granite of privatized public space, defined by dynamic diagonals instead of a Miesian grid, a radically democratic city park in contrast to Donnell’s private backyard. Also anchored by a pool, Vaillancourt’s fountain blasts with Brutalist vim — massive concrete tubes jutting upward, like a kinetic portrait of the city itself in rushing water and bas-relief abstraction.

For decades, even when the Embarcadero freeway thundered overhead, the plaza thrived as a site of collective gathering, skateboarding, sunbathing and open-ended play. Never static, it has always been a democratic plat-



Theo LaBrusciano-Carris/For the S.F. Chronicle

**Alef Rodrigues performs a nose manual on the edge of the Vaillancourt Fountain on April 19. The San Francisco park department wants to demolish the fountain as part of a renovation of Embarcadero Plaza.**

form, a lasting testament to San Francisco’s distinct urbanity.

The plaza may seem underused today, but the fault does not lie with us. As a regular user who grew up seeing the plaza and its unique fountain in iconic skateboarding videos, I visit the plaza often, on foot and four wheels, and I am never alone.

On any given day, people cross the plaza, pausing in front of the now-empty and fenced-off fountain, and take pictures. People still sunbathe on the steps, with the warm glow of sunlight reflecting off the red bricks of Halprin’s plaza.

Yes, over time, the plaza has indeed been neglected, but it is not blighted: Having weathered half a century of heavy use, it now feels more like a medieval piazza, whose rough-hewn beauty may be under-recognized today. The blame belongs to city agencies and corporate landlords who allowed it to decay, not to the public who continue to use it.

Demolition of the fountain would sever a living link to San Francisco’s modernist history and would obliterate one of the last intact collaborations

between world-class art and landscape architecture. The result would likely replace a singular civic work with yet another bland, consultant-designed and over-engineered patch of grass that could not possibly compete with the attractions of the Ferry Building across the Embarcadero.

The lazy, oft-repeated claim that the fountain “worked” only as a backdrop to the Embarcadero freeway is not only philistine but patently untrue. Halprin and Vaillancourt always intended the fountain to stand on its own, as both plaza and proscenium. It continues to be seen from all sides, even with the new fences that went up this spring, blocking access to the viewing platforms.

Phil Ginsburg, general manager of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, has made a career of ramming through big, privatized projects on parkland with minimal public process. Under the previous mayorality, this tactic would be seen as scandalous, but in this giddy moment of the city’s supposed rebirth under our new developer-friendly Mayor Daniel Lurie, such sketchy gambits are ig-

nored. The plan of selling off public park space to private developers under the guise of “revitalization” is not only cynical — it should be illegal.

In August, the Recreation and Parks Department formally requested the San Francisco Arts Commission’s approval to deaccession (translation: demolish) the Vaillancourt Fountain. While Ginsburg’s letter was shared with select reporters, it was not released to the public in what seems like the department’s strategy of tactical opacity. Independent assessments obtained by the press, the Cultural Landscape Foundation and Docomomo US/NOCA make clear that the fountain is repairable and even eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and California Register of Historical Resources. As an eligible historic resource, the fountain would have additional protections and review processes through the California Environmental Quality Act, something that has been omitted from the public conversation.

Yet the Recreation and Park Department has distorted these findings to manufacture a case for removal. In its own letter, the department dismisses the fountain not as art but as a “design constraint,” a particularly banal term for destroying public art.

The issue isn’t about nostalgia for skateboarders, art lovers and others. It’s about stewardship. Because the city has categorically neglected its responsibility to maintain the fountain, the public risks suffering its loss.

A cultural touchstone featured in countless films, Legoland models of San Francisco and works of art, Embarcadero Plaza and the Vaillancourt Fountain have remained a cohesive, provocative work of civic art — part traditional Italian piazza, part Modernist plaza, wholly San Franciscan.

With restoration, they could continue to be the dynamic public stage they were always meant to be. Shirking that responsibility in favor of an as-yet-to-be-seen private developer’s idea of parkland is not just negligent, it is a betrayal of the once-accepted notion that in San Francisco, public art and architecture make the city itself a place of wonder.

*Ted Barrow is an art historian, lecturer, long-time skateboarder and tour guide living in San Francisco.*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR Submit your letter at SFChronicle.com/submit-your-opinion

# Hunting won’t stop puma-human conflicts

Regarding “This Northern California county is ‘overrun’ with mountain lions. What should be done?” (California, SFChronicle.com, Aug. 3): If El Dorado County is considering mountain lion hunting, it should first look to Colorado, where it’s legal.

The risk of a puma attacking a person is still higher, per capita, in Colorado than in California, where hunting is banned.

There are also many unintended consequences from hazing mountain lions with hounds to make them scared of humans.

Unfettered hazing could lead to the killing of mountain lions, which won’t help. Studies show that killing a mountain lion one year only leads to more conflict the next.

Hunting with hounds would also increase the likelihood that these dogs would kill pets and imperil wildlife, such as Sierra red foxes and gray wolves.

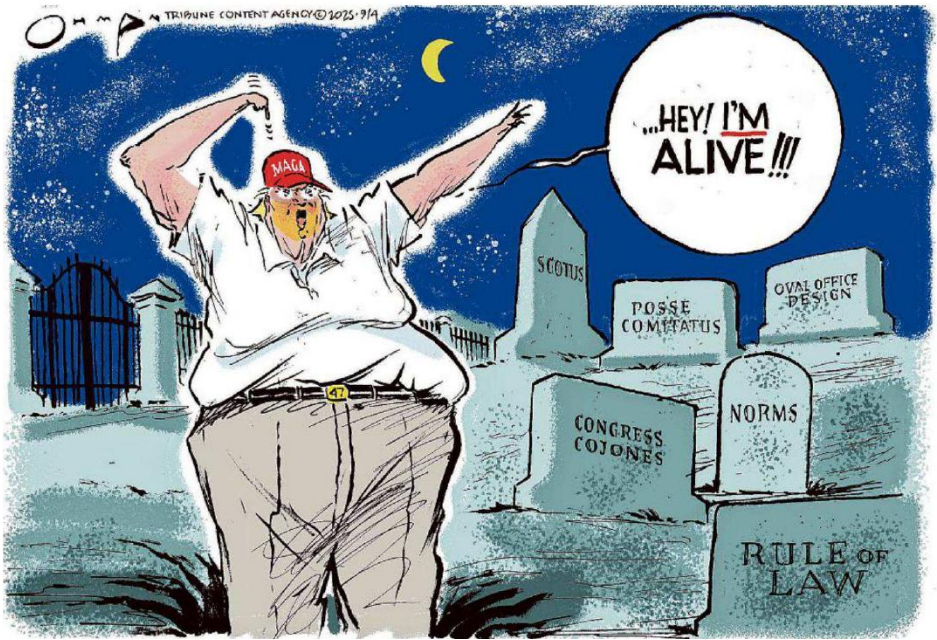
Investing in predator-proof enclosures is proven to protect farm animals and pets, the sources of most conflict. Keeping pet food indoors is another way to avoid attracting other animals that could lure pumas. The science is clear that nonlethal measures are more effective.

*Tiffany Yap, senior scientist, Center for Biological Diversity, Oakland*

## Don’t encourage gambling

Regarding “Banning fantasy sports betting in California is dumb politics. It’s even worse policy” (Open Forum, SFChronicle.com, Sept. 3): I was deeply disturbed by the argument that, because sports betting is popular among young men and Democrats struggle to attract the votes of young men, Democrats should not attack sports betting.

This argument ignores the real-life



Jack Ohman/Tribune Content Agency

negative consequences to many Californians, young men foremost among them, from the rapid and unchecked spread of online sports betting.

The media is saturated with ads promising low-risk bets, and it is ever easier to wager large sums with the click of a button on your phone. Research shows that record numbers of people are seeking help for gambling addiction.

In Pennsylvania, when online sportsbooks became available, online searches for resources to help with gambling addiction surged by 61%.

Millions of people are impacted negatively by online sports betting.

While the author’s goal of improving Democrats’ standing among young men is commendable, pandering to vice is not

the way to do it. Fighting to improve the economic prospects of youth, including those suffering from gambling addiction, would be a better approach.

*Jonathan Kapilian, San Francisco*

## Trump ‘loyalty test’ illegal

Regarding “Meteorologists now face a Trump ‘loyalty test’ when applying to National Weather Service jobs” (Politics, SFChronicle.com, Aug. 27): Requiring applicants for federal jobs to describe in writing their support for President Donald Trump’s policies and executive orders violates Public Law 96-303, the Code of Ethics for Government Service.

Item 1 of that code: “Put loyalty to the highest moral principles and to country

above loyalty to persons, party, or Government department.”

Item 2 reads, “Uphold the Constitution, laws, and regulations of the United States and of all governments therein and never be a party to their evasion.”

Trump’s loyalty oath is a shame, an overreach and just another example of his dictatorial approach to governing.

*Felix Smith, Carmichael, Sacramento County*

## Sign rental bill

As a resort owner in California, we welcome guests with open arms and, increasingly, with an open app.

Like many in our position, we have listed our rooms on online short-term-rental platforms to stay competitive in a changing market. We pay transient occupancy taxes, hold the required permits and comply with every local regulation.

That’s why we strongly support state Senate Bill 346, which the Legislature passed on Tuesday.

SB346 is about ensuring fairness; not limiting opportunity. The bill requires short-term-rental platforms to share basic data with local governments, which will allow the enforcement of rules. It’s a smart, balanced way to bring illegal operators into compliance and protect legitimate hosts and small operators like us.

Too many listings bypass the rules entirely — no permits, no taxes and no oversight. These short-term-rental operators enjoy the benefits of the market without any of the responsibilities. That’s unfair and unsustainable.

SB346 is a smart step forward, and Gov. Gavin Newsom should sign it.

*Christopher A. “Cab” Boettcher, owner, Mar Vista Farm + Cottages, Gualala, Mendocino County*