
Atlanta's cauldron serves as emblem of times: [Final Edition]

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ATLANTA - The remarkable Centennial Olympic Cauldron is a monumental structure that will remain an imposing presence in this city long after the Olympics end.

The sculpture that houses the Olympic flame during the 1996 Games - certainly the first cauldron be so prominent an emblem - is unlike any that has come before.

Typically, Olympic cauldrons have been either hand-held torches made gigantic, in keeping with the modern faith that bigger is better, or dishes-on-sticks - low-slung bowls perched atop pedestals that married a romantic vision of antique purity to a promise of futuristic glory.

The old designs served their purposes, but who still believes the tired fantasies they proposed? Certainly not Siah Armajani, the Milwaukee-based sculptor and public artist who dramatically swept them away.

Instead, he created an emblem for our time - a progressive sculptural image at once playful, profound, multilevelled in its pop-art vocabulary of forms and flat-out startling to see.

Capped with a two-storey, flame-shaped cauldron of red-painted stainless steel, the 111-foot-tall, free-standing tower is constructed from gray steel in an open truss-work format reminiscent of a child's Erector set or the innards of a skyscraper.

A simple wooden house - painted dark green with a peaked roof, it's straight from a Monopoly game - is embedded in the tower's first level.

There, a 190-foot-long bridge spanning four lanes of traffic on Ralph David Abernathy Blvd. connects the tower to the stadium.

A zig-zagging staircase winds around the tower, creating viewing platforms on all four sides, while a stabilizing support structure slams into one side at a dramatic angle.

Hoisted in the air as a domestic link between the bridge to the stadium and the staircase to the cauldron's flame, it pivots between a homely image of hospitality and a childhood symbol of economic gamesmanship.

After all, sports stadiums in America typically are built in low-income neighborhoods, where real-estate costs are minimized and surrounding residents are usually without a persuasive political voice.

Atlanta's Olympic Stadium, in a poor neighborhood just outside the central business district, is no exception.

The bridge, staircase and angled strut visually animate the sculpture. From across the asphalt parking lot, the Centennial Cauldron looks rather like a colossal Transformer - one of those popular sci-fi toys that mechanically unfold to turn a race car or spaceship into a forbidding robot warrior.

The cauldron's shape looks like a flame, which will recall its original function. Its gracefully unfurling form also suggests the opening bud of a flower - physical beauty coming into full bloom.

Armajani - who was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1939 and immigrated to the United States in 1960 - seems determined to keep in mind the exclusions that come with privilege.

Like any great democratic monument, and in keeping with the Games' origin in ancient Greece, his flame has been designed to burn brightly in the ``polis."

So perhaps the most remarkable and effective design decision the artist made concerned the sculpture's placement. The Centennial Olympic Cauldron is not inside the stadium, nor even poised on the stadium's rim.

This crucial symbol is fully outside, in the public parking lot.

The flame and the tower's upper portions can easily be seen from inside, but you don't need a ticket to see the sculpture.

Anyone can come and look.