

## Scioto Mile sculpture shouldn't evoke image of Three Mile Island

An attractive cooling tower is still a cooling tower.

I keep studying the sculpture proposed for the Scioto Mile by the Pizzuti Cos. and wishing it were shaped like something else. The idea of a 79-foot mirrored structure that reflects the skyline and glows at night sounds kind of appealing.

People would still complain about it because it's difficult to erect any artwork that big without stirring up criticism. (Parisians disliked the Eiffel Tower early on.) But Columbus would have something bold and eye-catching (and privately funded) near its center — which would be good, except that it's shaped like a cooling tower.

Am I being too literal?

The artist, Brian Tolle, said he isn't building a cooling tower. The shape is a "hyperboloid." On the other hand, he also said his father's first job was designing cooling towers for American Electric Power, which has its headquarters in Columbus.

So the inspiration seems obvious. And, no matter what Tolle intends, I'm pretty sure that visitors arriving in town without advance knowledge would see that shape and say: "Hey, look over there. Isn't that an aesthetically appealing cooling tower?"

After all, the artist has said he hopes that his sculpture will become a signature piece in Columbus — much like the Space Needle in Seattle or the arch in St. Louis.

Those structures are strong identifiers in part because they're enormous (way bigger than what Tolle is proposing) and because they symbolize something about their cities.

Naturally, people will wonder what a cooling tower means.

From there, it's one short step to AEP and its coal-fired power plants — which, in addition to providing electricity and jobs, have a reputation for polluting the atmosphere with carbon and sulfur dioxide, and other bad stuff. I don't see how the sculpture can escape those associations.

(Unless the shape makes people think of nuclear power, in which case the glow would take on a whole new meaning.)

My point is that cooling towers don't evoke affectionate feelings in people. Overcoming that handicap is a lot to ask of a sculpture.

Even Chicago's giant Marilyn Monroe, under whose billowing skirt tourists are invited to walk, has its problems.

Earlier this year, the website Virtual Tourist listed the country's 10 worst pieces of public art. The 26-foot Marilyn was No. 1. The Mary Tyler Moore statue in Minneapolis also made the list. Where public art is concerned, the public is a tough audience.

Because private money is still being solicited and the design is still being tweaked, we might or might not reach the point that Tolle's vision actually rises on the riverfront and contends for future Virtual Tourist recognition.

Whatever the final product, I hope I can look at it without being reminded of 20th-century technology.

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