

Cows, dogs and snakes

Flailing around for a solution to Columbus' urban identity crisis

by Rich Warren

Columbus' history is riddled with grandiose, failed plans designed to catapult our town into the "world class" league that's eluded us for so long. At the beginning of the 20th century, for example, civic leaders called for the demolition of all buildings between the Statehouse and the river, to be replaced with a lovely landscaped esplanade. As far as I'm concerned, they should have tried to knock down the Statehouse as well. (Even that unstately building is an example of an unrealized ambition; the dome originally planned for it was never constructed, leaving Ohio with the only one of 50 state capitols to resemble a thermostat.)

It seems like every few months the "Yay Columbus" crowd trumpets yet another grand civic project. A few weeks or months later, the scheme quietly fades into oblivion—except for the schemes that should have faded into oblivion. Anyone remember Ameriflora?

In the mid-'90s, there was the proposal to put up a 300-foot bronze statue of Christopher Columbus overlooking downtown. A Russian sculptor had already created the monolith and disassembled it, offering it to us free of charge if only we would transport it here and piece it together again.

This was something I actually thought might work. Hell yes, it's hideous, I reasoned, but it will put us on the map. San Francisco has its Golden Gate Bridge. St. Louis has its arch. Newark has its basket. Columbus—we've got nothing for people to hang their hats on visually.

National polls taken by our own convention and visitors bureau show that Americans have absolutely no concrete image with which to associate Columbus. We're the only ones who think we're a cowtown—the rest of the country can't say anything about us, kind or unkind. So, I thought, let's put up that colossal Chris and hope people don't drive here to laugh at us, like they do to Newark. We need an icon, something that will slap people in the face and say "This is Columbus!" Anyway, when they unveiled

that arch in St. Louis, it must have looked to a lot of eyes like a gigantic croquet wicket.

But our city fathers, in their infinite wisdom, quietly demurred, allowing the Russian to peddle his immense explorer elsewhere, perhaps to Kings Island as a bungee jumping platform. It was probably for the best. Motorists on I-70 would have crashed into each other gawking at it. As it is, all they do now is stare at the backside of Miranova and yawn.

More recently, there were discussions of embracing our cowtown image and erecting cow statues citywide. Normally, I have an almost unquenchable thirst for kitsch on a colossal scale, but this idea filled me with horror. I absolutely abhor cows. Nevermind that as the son of a Bordens employee I grew up surrounded by images of that beaming, beatific Everycow, the mythic Elsie.

Perhaps my hatred stems from that incident at the county fair in my childhood when a lumbering Holstein launched a salvo of molten manure just as I passed. Or the time when my uncle took me to the agricultural research farm in Wooster and I was greeted with the sight of a cow with a window in its side, so people could observe digestion in its many stomachs. At the time, Bossy appeared to have a Technicolor belly ache.

Most likely, my hatred stems from an incident in my adulthood when my brother, my best friend and I were chased across a sun-dappled meadow by 50 frothing cattle whom I'm certain were determined to make us their lunch. They drove us inside an abandoned house, which they then proceeded to surround and lurk ominously,

like something out of *The Birds*, only with horns and udders. Laugh if you like, but as we were hoofing it hell-for-leather across that grassy pasture, I expected at any moment to feel the sharp agony of a cow's incisors ripping into my buttocks.

Last week, someone told me Fred and Howard were supporting the cow constructions. I thought, Dear Lord, if Fred and Howard are behind this, there'll be no stopping it. So I called them up, a complete stranger masquerading as a *Columbus Alive* columnist, to try to reason with them. You can imagine my relief when I learned that, because Chicago and New York recently sprinkled cows across their cityscapes, Fred and Howard realize that our doing so would make Columbus look like Big Apple and Windy City wannabes.

So now they've thrown their not inconsiderable weight behind the idea of putting Thurber dogs all over town, not unlike the lovely canine statues already standing just outside the Thurber House. Who could argue with that idea? It's original, we'd have images of man's best friend everywhere to charm us and our visitors, and the Columbus connection, from a civic pride standpoint, is clear: James Thurber is our funniest native son.

I do argue that we could just as easily put up other Thurber animals, like unicorns and seals. And we could have a lot of fun with the dog statues' names. (In New York, a cow on a skateboard was dubbed "Cowabunga" and a bovine resembling Swiss cheese was called "Hole-y Cow.") My suggestion for a dog statue: an empty pedestal with the inscription "Dog Gone."

But what I would really like to see—so much that I'm willing to go door to door to campaign for it—is a revival of the snake, the glass replica of the Serpent Mound that was proposed as a canopy over the Broad Street bridge. You may remember the flack about it—just as with any unusual artwork, it inspired both strong passions and scornful loathing, principally on the part of the county engineer, John Circle, who felt the snake would overwhelm the beautiful bridge he had designed.


Personally, I found his reasoning, well, circular. And besides, *the bridge is not that beautiful*. It's rather plain looking actually. I mean, go to Paris if you want to see beautiful bridges. Put the Broad Street bridge over the Seine and the French would gather in large groups to openly sneer. But then, they're

good at that.

I remember when I first stumbled across the artist's prototype of the snake bridge at one of those First Thursday events at the art museum (you can still see this same model in the lobby of the main library downtown). I was absolutely agog. I've never seen a proposal for a civic improvement project that excited me so much and so quickly. It was transfixingly beautiful—cobalt blue, sinuously stretching from one end of the bridge to the other, and so exact a replica of the Serpent Mound it was even swallowing an egg. Right away I felt that folks all over America might perceive this as something uniquely ours—a real-life Ohio icon that, unlike that tacky giant statue of ol' Chris, really took your breath away.

Despite quite a bit of local enthusiasm for the Super Snake, Circle's loud denunciations and concerns about the cost effectively put the kibosh on it. Honest to Pete, some of our city fathers show as much imagination as a tree stump. So when I read in June that Circle had died, I quietly hatched a scheme to resuscitate the serpent. I called various movers and shakers who were once vocal snake supporters, but alas, I'm dismayed to report there's no sizzle or spark remaining to bring the idea back. One man went so far as to call the notion "dead in the water" or, in this case, dead over the water. Fred and Howard politely called the snake a "nice idea" and switched the conversation back to the dogs.

Still, Tim Kauffman of the Greater Columbus Arts Council feels that Mayor Michael Coleman's administration is more receptive to constructing public art and that, given enough grassroots effort, the snake canopy isn't completely out of the question, perhaps somewhere besides the Broad Street bridge. Kauffman noted that several bridges in town will need to be replaced over the next few years, any of which might be adorned with artwork, giving me hope that someday we might see more snakes over Columbus roadways than there were in my former place of employment.

Whether it's a snake or whether it's dogs, we'd better hurry before all the good animals get taken and we're forced to put up a statue in honor of, say, fungus. I can get behind the dog statues if I must, although I'm convinced it's the snake that will catapult us into civic stardom. I know it will be expensive, but I volunteer to mount a one-man crusade to raise the funds. Just send me your checks made out to Residents' Independent Coalition Helping Worldclass Art of Reptiles Reach Everyone Now, or R.I.C.H. W.A.R.R.E.N. Take out all those messy periods if you like. Give generously. I'd like nothing more than to watch that snake slowly start stretching across the Scioto from my penthouse at Miranova. 



Thurber dog statues at the Thurber House