

THE SEGOVIA SCULPTURES: TSUNAMI OF CRITICISM

By George Volsky

Coral Gables, August 25. For the last several weeks, I have been passively listening to ireful residents criticizing the two exotic aluminum flowers that the City of Coral Gables had purchased and recently installed in the middle of the Segovia Street roundabouts.

Distributing the monthly Coral Gables Cultural Calendar in over 160 local establishments, and frequenting public places such as Books & Books, Burger Bob's and City Hall, I have been aggressively accosted by acquaintances with negative comments about the flowers. Some interlocutors even suggested that since I had been instrumental in setting up the city's original Cultural Advisory Board, I was in a way responsible for what in their view is artistically the highly inappropriate and exceedingly overpriced embellishment of the Segovia circles.

(For the record, I had nothing to do with the Segovia art selection nor, records show, had 99.99 percent of the city residents. Neither did the present nor the previous Coral Gables Cultural Development Boards, several Board members affirm. They said that about three years ago they were informed of an ukase, apparently by the then City Manager Patrick Salerno, that from then their exclusive role would be recommending to the City Commission how to fund cultural grant applicants.)

In addition, residents have voiced their Segovia frustration on the internet. "I wish a Mediterranean-style fountain had been installed," wrote Susan Brawner. "I was born in Coral Gables and have always loved the De Soto fountain. Smaller version of that fountain would have been beautiful."

Another resident who calls herself "Liz" was less charitable: "Horrible. It does not belong in the historic city of Coral Gables. It does not enhance our neighborhood nor our architecture. They need to be moved. They are a true nuisance while driving and are simply horrid." Another anonymous resident asked: "Will it even stand up to a minor hurricane. I doubt it. One million dollars? I'm sorry." Jorge Pena, a David Williams apartment house resident, wrote sarcastically: "For one million dollars it should move and make coffee or something." Still, Fabio Alvino liked the art and called it "A beautiful disruption in the middle of a uniform Mediterranean environment."

And there is a widely-commented August 1 letter signed by 96 Coral Gables "residents and business owners" sent to the five members of the City Commission, expressing their "disappointment" with the selection or the Segovia circles artwork. "Our opposition is not out of lack of respect for the artist's talents, but due to the fact that the artwork does not represent what our City is all about and what George Merrick envisioned Coral Gables to be: a Mediterranean city mirrored after Spanish historical sites... Many of the residents that live close claim that they were never notified of a public hearing even though they are in proximity of the artwork in question. The names below are only a small representation of the residents that have expressed dissatisfaction for the selection made. We are coming to you, our elected officials, with a request for the sculptures to be moved to a more suitable location such as Fairchild Tropical Garden or any other many parks."

Olga M. Ramudo, president and CEO of Express Travel, at 299 Alhambra Circle, who drafted the letter and was the first to sign it, said since its posting to the Commission several dozen prominent residents have added their names to it, and many others told her they "totally support" its content. She and her friends want a comprehensive, open and televised review of the issue by the Commission.

Discussing the artwork with residents, who unlike Ms. Ramudo and the signers of her letter, spoke requesting anonymity, confirmed that their disapproval of the Segovia project is chiefly based on the flowers' perceived unsuitability on the circles and in Coral Gables as a whole. The people who strongly give vent to their reproof also resented that the process of selecting the sculptures was made without public input. "We are paying for this thing more than a \$1 million plus interest, and at the least they should have showed us what we'll get for the money; that never happened." said one resident.

As for the artwork's selection, a perusal of the public record that documents that process, points to a bureaucratic orchestration by Salerno. According to City Hall sources, Salerno hoodwinked the City Commission to act; it did so in the belief that the selection had made through public vetting and publically acquiesced to. "In City Hall it's believed on all hands Salerno engineered the whole thing, and he was very good at that," one well-informed resident said.

Taken together, there appears little doubt that the City Commission faces a tsunami of criticism about the "Segovia sculptures." with no apparent solution at sight.

To understand how an art acquisition process legally is supposed to work, one has to harken back to May 23, 1995, when the City Commission created the first Cultural Affairs Advisory Board specifically charged with advising the Commission on all cultural issues, including funding requests by cultural and community organizations.

As a Board member, (having served almost two decades earlier on Dade County's first cultural council, and having drafted guidelines that created the County's Art in Public Places Trust), I worked with Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli and City Manager Jack Eads to establish Coral Gables' policy on artwork donations and, by extension, purchase.

Resolution 29040 to that effect, passed March 29, 1996 and was important for two reasons. 1. For the first time, the Commission laid down its artistic concept for Coral Gables. Art, it stated, should "enhance the artistic heritage of the City and possess aesthetic characteristics that contribute positively to the quality of public places, lands and buildings..." 2. The Resolution stated that the Cultural Advisory Board, while solely empowered to advise the Commission on cultural matters, "may request assistance by a panel of Coral Gables art experts and others, as the need may arise, which shall report findings in writing to the Board." The panel, "designated by the Board chairman, subject to the Board's approval," comprises an art museum or gallery administrator, an art/architectural historian, a public sector art administrator and "one member of the Board," and it "shall meet at the call of the chairman." (The March 1996 Resolution also officially instructed the Historic Preservation department to provide staff support to the Cultural Board. Under Salerno, staffers of the Development Department, which he renamed "Sustainability," staffed the Cultural Board's activities. City Manager Cathy Swanson rightfully returned the staffing to the logical department, Historic.)

The main function of the ad hoc "expert panel" – which did not meet in almost five years while I served on the Board - was to estimate in writing the market value of prospective donations; individual donors being known sometimes to overprice their gifts for income tax purposes.

That said, it is only fair that I opine about the sculptures, or "colorful objects," as some call them. Unlike many residents, I don't dislike the two flowers. Their creator, Alice Aycock, is a respected 70-year-old New York-based artist whose works have been described by The New York Times as "installations." I would favor, for example, to have on Segovia something like her New York City's "Cyclic Twist." But I believe that her flowers somehow don't fit in their present locations which diminish their conceptual merit.

Of the two, I prefer the little flower on the Coral Way circle. It has a mass which the larger on Biltmore Way lacks. It should have been bigger and without the adjoined metal bulb from which it supposedly stems. While the two flowers are said to form a unit, that notion, because of their disproportional size and distance, does not come through. The large Biltmore Way flower, seen from almost every angle, impresses one as an intriguing example of aluminum mumbo jumbo, a shiny metallic Gordian knot, or a huge spider devouring entwisted petals. On the other hand, I am sure that both flowers would be appreciated artistically if placed against a wall (instead of the present 360 degree skyline) with the best side on view, or in a museum. But on the Segovia roundabouts they are disharmonious. And they can be seen, very briefly, basically by motorists who perforce must carefully navigate the roundabouts. (Of which later.)

Researching briefly for this article, I have requested public records of the process that had led to the purchase of the two Segovia artworks. The City Clerk's office and the Historic Preservation Department were able to provide only a total of seven pages. These included three, each single-page, the briefest possible and meaningless summaries of the deliberations of a five-member "panel of experts" - presided over by Carol Damian, former director of FIU's museum - while choosing the artwork, and one longer resume of that panel's final, Sept. 10, 2014 meeting when the choice was made. There was also a one-page document of the Historic Preservation Board's meeting stating that Dr. Damian asked for and obtained a "Special Certificate of Appropriateness" for the Segovia purchases, a bureaucratic cover up for unilateral decisions. And there are minutes of the City Commission's approval of the panel's choice, at the request of Dr. Damian. The lack of details of the panel members' meetings means that we will never know whether deliberating how to spend \$1 million of taxpayer money, they made sense or they were talking through their hats.

Another striking aspect of the panel's meetings is that the first three (August 23, 2013, Dec. 17, 2013 and March 4, 2014) took place at 1 Alhambra Plaza, the office of the Economic Sustainability Department, then directed by Cynthia Birdsill. Only two persons, Birdsill and her assistant, attended the first three meetings. I am sure that very few residents are aware of that office's existence, much less of important city meeting held there.

The panel's fourth meeting, on Sept. 10, 2014, was held at the City Hall Commission Chambers. Birdsill, then Acting Assistant City Manager, presided. It lasted three hours. Not a single resident was there, nor any member of the Cultural Board. It was "all Salerno family" affair. For no apparent reason Birdsill was joined by five department directors and four other top city administration officials, none of whom was remotely involved in the artwork selection process. (Since the average salary of each of these 10 persons was then at least \$150,000, their useless three-hour-long presence in the Chambers cost taxpayers additional \$190,000. (None of them cared! It was not their money.)

There were two other interesting aspects of the Sept. 10, 2014, Commission Chambers meeting. The first was that in talking about the merit of the Segovia sculpture finalists, Dr. Damian said that the art of Brad Goldberg, a prominent, internationally known Texas environmental sculptor "lacked excitement and elegance," and that he "did not push the envelope enough." One well known local artist, who read Dr. Damian's statement, found it "bizarre, inelegant and unnecessarily offensive."

Secondly, Ms. Aycock, who described herself as an "avid gardener," said, referring to her two flowers, that she "tried to create a work that resonates with the environment," drawing "on sci-fi norms." On Nov. 18, she explained that she also wanted to reinforce Coral Gables' "identity as a Garden City." When inquired in City Hall how the artist could have identified "City Beautiful" as a "Garden City," I was pointed to the 1997 book titled "Coral Gables, an American Garden City," printed in Paris, and produced by the University of Miami School of Architecture and the Institut Francais D'Architecture.

I know a quite a bit about the book. At the request of Mayor Valdes-Fauli, I edited its text in part and recommended it for publication. (A major scandal concerning its handling by the School of Architecture is now almost forgotten.) For almost two decades, the handsome and historically well-illustrated book is still gifted to distinguished visitors, and Aycock probably got one too.

If she did, she must have only looked at the book's attractive cover and title which gave me pause. I held my piece because it would be unprofessional to question the writers' judgment. Still, for me (and presumably for most people) the word "garden" principally means lots of flowers and some fruit trees. Yet there is no single flower in the book's 137 past-and-contemporary city pictures.

In the 1960s and 1970s, some flowers were still carefully nurtured in Coral Gables gardens. There was a large "plantation" of roses on South Greenway Drive, close to where one member of the Damian panel lives). It is gone. As our climate became hotter (despite Marco Rubio's denials), flowers simply began to shrivel. City employees, after making brave and losing efforts to plant some small flowers in

public places switched to sun-resistant shrubbery. Therefore, it might not be un-factual to say that the only big flowers in the City today are the two aluminum ones on Segovia.

Finally, a few words, or maybe a little more than a few, about the quintet who chose the artwork. In the record of their meetings those five persons had a distinctive name: "Segovia Circles Fountain Judging Panel." Yet there is no record how, when and by whom that "Judging Panel" was formed as a new entity in an apparent collision with the City's Cultural Advisory Board ordinance, according to which such an ad hoc group should belong to and ought to report.

Equally significant is the fact that not a single resident attended the panel's meetings; there is no record that the public was advised about the panel's creation and its reunions. Nor was I able to obtain the text of the International Request for Qualification for the Segovia artwork, posted by the panel, following which 181 applications from all over the world were received by the City. Nobody in the City knows how that number was reduced to five finalists, and why.

The obvious conclusion is that the purchasing process, which in Coral Gables is always open to public scrutiny, seemed to have been kept stealthily secret by Salerno, with the visible part played by Birdsill, his main "enabler," according to many in City Hall.

In addition to Dr. Damian, the other four panel members were: Silvia Karman Cubiñá, director of Miami Beach's Bass Museum of Art; Brian Dursum, former director of the University of Miami's Lowe Art Museum; Nanette Zapata, Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden's COO; and architect Julio Grabiél.

Grabiél was at the same time member of the City's Planning Board; serving on two boards simultaneously is unprecedented, some say it is even unlawful. Alice Aycock was certainly well known to Karman Cubiñá. One of her works adorns the Bass. There is no record of Cubiñá's mentioning that connection during her service on the panel. No surprise there. Even without proper data, it seems clear that all panel members had crept their service through hawse-hole.

The selection of the panel, apparently by Birdsill and Salerno, has raised an additional question. Why was Virginia Miller, owner of her own prestigious gallery and president of the Coral Gables Gallery Association, not appointed instead of someone from Miami Beach? According to several local artists, Virginia is the most knowledgeable public art specialist in Miami Dade. She loves this city. She stayed in Coral Gables whereas some of her colleagues packed up and fled to Wynwood.

Then one wonders how much the quintet knew about the concept of "Public Art." First, they threw the much vaulted Coral Gables principle of transparency under the bus, or allowed Salerno enablers to do it which is even worse. Second, in selecting the exoteric flowers they apparently did not consider where they were to be located.

Other than Brian Dursum, they did not know how important positioning has been historically in sculpture. In 1504, when Michelangelo finished his David, arguably the most famous sculpture in the world today, he, Piero Solderini, head of the Florentine Republic, Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Boticelli and two other artists spent almost two days arguing where and which way to install the 18-foot marble masterpiece. Regretfully, nobody transcribed their deliberations, but they made the right decision. Rather than placing David inside or lose a church as some had recommended, they anchored it firmly on Florence's main public square. It stood there for 512 years. Countless millions have admired David's excellent marble copy, or its inimitable original in Florence's Academia museum. And, as Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo's pupil and biographer wrote: "Anyone who has seen David has no need to see anything else by any other sculptor, dead or alive."

Our less-than-cognizant flower deciders did not have to talk about how the artwork's site would relate to the rest of the city - that was preordained. But they had to take into the consideration - which

apparently they did not – who, when and how would see the flowers. They should have realized that anything installed in the Segovia vehicular roundabouts would be seen basically by drivers circling those intersections, and fleetingly at that.

To ascertain the average time a motorist can observe the Segovia flowers, the other day for 30 minutes, with a scrupulous second-keeper, I tested all approaches to the circles during the afternoon traffic. I was timed from 16 seconds to one minute between the moment I could see the flowers from afar until when I passed circles and left its artwork behind. The longest, one minute observation period wasn't even that: Giving the right-of-way to a half a dozen cars, I could not look at the bigger flower. Clearly when one drives carefully on Segovia and tries to avoid collision, in the best of circumstances there is little time left to observe the flowers and grasp their relevance to the City. Significantly, because the pool from which the large flower emerges has been built on a high mound above the normal vision level of most drivers, that prevents motorists from seeing the water even.

Importantly, neither I nor my time-keeper saw a single pedestrian on or near Segovia. It is understandable - anyone strolling there during eight or ten hours of the daily 93 degree-plus weather does so at his/her own peril. I am told by residents who live closer to the circles – nobody does very close - that during late evening hours a few dog owners and professionals dog walkers are doing their canine “constitutionals” there.

Thus, would it not have been better – and considerably less expensive - as Ms. Brawner suggests - to install on the Segovia circles two proportionally smaller renditions of the De Soto Fountain and preserve the City's historic artistic consistency? And will the City Commission answer the key question: Does the Segovia artwork add to Coral Gables' sui generis, nationally and- internationally known and resident-cherished identity, or is it just an \$1-million error?