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Michael Overall: Tulsa didn't seem to realize what it had

By Michael Overall Tulsa World 14 hrs ago 1



For at least the past 10 years or so, Shane Hood would kind of hold his breath and brace himself every time he walked past the intersection of Fourth and Main streets. He couldn't relax until the rusty top of the old Bertoia Fountain came into view above the ridge of the sunken plaza next to First Place Tower.

"I just knew I was going to go by one day and it wouldn't be there," Hood says. "At some point it was going to be yanked out and scraped, or just cut into pieces and thrown in the trash like a piece of junk."

The Tulsa Foundation for Architecture, where Hood serves as board president, played a vital role in making sure that didn't happen after all. TFA found a new location for the fountain after developers announced plans last year to demolish the plaza and build a five-story parking garage.

It will undergo restoration and move to the recently restored Tulsa Central Library at Fourth Street and Denver Avenue.

The library will become the third and presumably final home for the Bertoia, which originally stood at the entrance to the First National Auto Bank, where the fountain's abstract modernist design

complimented the mid-century modern architecture of the city's first drive-through bank in 1959. But customers complained that Oklahoma's gusty winds turned the 15-foot-tall fountain into a giant shower, spraying them and their cars and keeping the sidewalk perpetually wet. So the fountain moved to the sunken plaza, which was another example of mid-century modern design.

Unfortunately, the plaza's stark, geometric minimalism — not to mention its location down a flight of stairs from ground-level — made it unpopular with pedestrians. And the fountain went largely unnoticed and neglected, falling into disrepair. It hasn't sprayed water for at least eight years, Hood says.



That's terribly frustrating to anybody who appreciates the history of 20th century design. Harry Bertoia was an icon, designing some of the most recognizable furniture and sculptures of the mid-century period, and his work remains on prominent display at libraries in Dallas and Omaha, Nebraska, as well as in museums around the world.

Tulsa doesn't seem to realize what it has had all these years. But let's hope the new location will finally bring the fountain the respect it has deserved all along.



Staff Writer Michael Overall

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Peter Henry Apr 24, 2017 1:21pm

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