

The Woodlands History

THE WOODLANDS, THE INSIDE STORY OF CREATING A BETTER HOMETOWN

Art in Public Places

By Roger Galatas

Prior to its grand opening in 1974, The Woodlands Corporation adopted a formal program to provide art in public places throughout the community. That came from a recommendation by Coulson Tough to George Mitchell. Prior to joining Mitchell's organization, Coulson was in charge of developing facilities at the University of Houston. There he initiated a similar public art program funded by setting aside one percent of the construction costs of new buildings on the university campus. He recommended a similar approach for all commercial buildings in The Woodlands.

Mitchell bought into the proposal and supported it faithfully. But given

the early marketing challenges in attracting commercial users to the new community, he felt that spending one percent of construction costs could drive prospects away. Instead, he agreed to impose an art fund fee of one-quarter percent of the cost of all commercial building construction in The Woodlands, including that undertaken by the company for its own account. In addition, he agreed to add a half-percent of all commercial land sales received by The Woodlands to the fund. To date, slightly more than \$6,000,000 has been collected and used to purchase and maintain pieces of art located in public places. Of that amount, The Woodlands Corporation has contributed approximately 55 percent of the total and third parties added 45 percent.

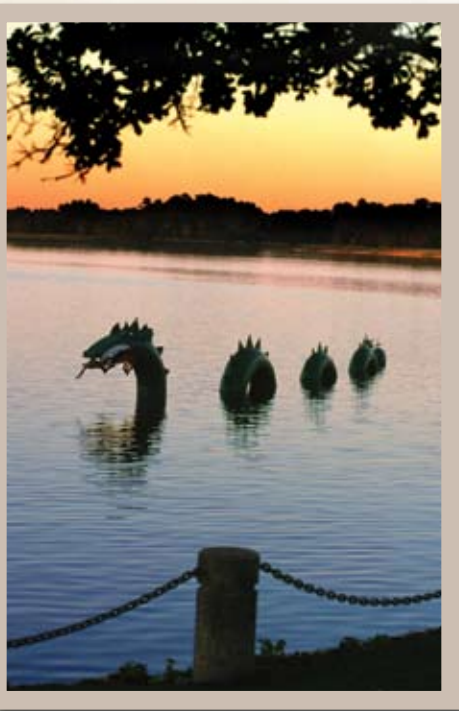
Initially, the selection of specific pieces of art and their location was made by an informal committee composed of Mitchell and Coulson Tough with the advice of an art consultant. Later, it became a somewhat more structured committee and included Coulson Tough as chairman and Cynthia Woods Mitchell, a true champion of the arts in our community. They let me participate in committee meetings. The former curator of a major corporate art collection in Houston served as advisor to the committee, but George Mitchell always participated in final decisions or at least Cynthia let him think so. Artists were selected based on their national or regional reputation and exhibits of work in recognized museums.

With a few exceptions, imposition of the art fee was not a major problem with commercial users. Most saw the

contribution as an investment in the community that would accrue to their benefit. However, collection of the art fee was more successful when paid in conjunction with the land purchase rather than trying to collect it after the building was complete. After the land sale we lost some control of the process. Therefore, an estimated building cost was used to calculate the required payment upfront. The Woodlands Corporation retained control over how the art fund was utilized, where art was placed and selection of the artists.

There have been a few exceptions made to collection of the art fee. For example, public facilities constructed by the county or school district do not pay the fee. Non-profit institutions such as the hospitals do not pay the fee, but they have generally agreed to include pieces of art on their campuses. Several of the very large commercial users have negotiated a lower art fee in exchange for their agreement to also include works of art as part of their building landscaping program visible to the public.

For the most part the selection and placement of works of art have been well received by the community, but there have been some vocal exceptions. One that I recall is the piece installed in the median of Research Forest Drive near the Houston Advanced Research Center (HARC) campus. It is a modern painted steel sculpture that Coulson had originally planned for placement within a nearby retail center. But George Mitchell suggested to Coulson the roadway leading to HARC's campus deserved attention of the art program. Since this piece was ready for installation, Coulson moved it



"The Dragon" aka Rise of the Midgard Serpent by Marc Rosenthal was a gift to the community from Cynthia Woods Mitchell. It was installed in 1985.

to the public street location and that is when we started hearing from the nearby community.

As it happened, the art piece was painted a rather bright orange color. Motorists complained that it looked like a confusing traffic barricade. Local graduates of Texas A&M were most vocal because to them it looked like a salute to the University of Texas whose famous school color is burnt orange. Residents called my office, Coulson's office, and I would guess Mitchell heard the complaints too. The solution we finally agreed upon was to paint the sculpture a dark "Baylor" green so it would blend into the colors of the natural vegetation and become hardly visible to anyone. The complaints went away. But recently the piece has been restored to its original colors and relocated by "current management" to a very visible spot in the median of Lake Woodlands Drive not far from the bridge crossing at the lake. I'm not sure what the public response has been. One purpose of art is to generate interest and this piece certainly does that.



On The Shoulders Of Giants by Robert Cook was installed in 1989 with the inscription "If I have seen farther it is by standing on the shoulders of giants" – Isaac Newton

A very popular piece of art is "The Dragon," which was personally acquired by Cynthia Mitchell and donated to the community. The challenge with this very large serpentine piece was finding a place to put it. It was green and red with a resemblance to the Loch Ness Monster suggesting a watery site as a suitable home. We considered several lakes on the golf courses but decided it would be too much distraction for serious golfers.

Finally our planning department suggested a location near "Tea Cup Island" in Lake Woodlands visible from Woodlands Parkway. And that is where the Dragon found a home. It has become a recognizable symbol of The Woodlands for those who travel the Parkway. It has also become a sporting target for graduating high school students who come out in the dark of the night to paint it a different color in celebration of their special day. This prompts a re-paint to restore it to its original form. It will likely never rust because of its many layers of paint. I just hope no accident occurs from student activity.

Tea Cup Island is a small circular man-made island near the spillway and dam for Lake Woodlands, and it came about through the imagination of a caffeine-addicted land planner. One day as Lake Woodlands was being designed, a planner set his cup of tea on a paper contour map of the lake. Upon removal, the cup left a circular stain on the map and the planner embellished the drawing with a bulkhead, a bridge, landscaping and an observation tower. It was so attractive we added it to the construction plans for the lake and it is now part of a lakeside park for the community, a companion for the Dragon.

One piece of art that seems especially appropriate for The Woodlands is entitled "On The Shoulders Of Giants." Inscribed on its base is a quote from Isaac Newton – "If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." We can all relate to that.



Photos courtesy of The Woodlands Corporation/Ted Washington

Mirage II by Ben Waitena was originally installed on Research Forest Drive at the entryway to the former HARC campus and was recently moved to its Lake Woodlands Drive location.



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Roger Galatas is the former president of The Woodlands Corporation and the author, with Jim Barlow, of the popular book, The Woodlands, The Inside Story of Creating a Better Hometown. For

more information, please visit www.rgiwoodlands.com.