



Media Contact:

Lisa Levy Buch
Director of Public Affairs
MGLFE Construction Authority
(626) 305-7004 or (909) 267-0161 cell
llevybuch@foothillextension.org

Interview with Design Concept Advisor Andrew Leicester

Q: Why did you choose to engage in public art as an artistic practice?

AL: As a young kid growing up in the English countryside, I would explore disused and abandoned quarries, old canals, viaducts, industrial plants and brick kilns. It was fascinating to see this industrial archeology in complete ruin and covered in ivy. Those forms had the look of ancient funerary and ritual architecture and resulted in my first thoughts about a possible career focused on art and architecture.

I studied physical geography—understanding landforms and how humans have altered them such as redirecting rivers. I love landscape and its scale. I wanted to work on a level where the artwork is commensurate with the mass of the surrounding landscape as well as with the urban infrastructure.

How art functions in the context of a specific community and its environment is a particular interest of mine as seen in my earliest works, which were primarily land art and environmental installations documenting erosion over time.

To me public art is encountered in everyday life and, as a result, has a huge audience without requiring the viewer to go to a specific space to see it. Unwittingly, people experience art in an environment over saturated with other visual stimuli.

Q: How did working with the Metro Gold Line Foothill Extension Construction Authority differ from some of your prior commissioned projects?

AL: It was an extraordinarily unique opportunity. Within the Request for Proposals link was a video with Habib Balian, CEO of the Construction Authority and art consultant Lesley Elwood standing at the bridge site by the freeway, describing how they wanted an artist to create the concept for the bridge from the start. I could not believe it and was intrigued that the artist was not an afterthought as is the case in so many public projects.

I immediately started working on ideas and researching the area before flying to Los Angeles for the interviews to present my sketchbooks demonstrating my creative process. Being involved from the beginning really allowed me to impact the overall gestalt. I am deeply grateful to Habib for his leadership and commitment to quality that ensured the bridge adhered to the original concept.

Q: What was the creative evolution of the initial concept for the Gold Line Bridge?

AL: The Construction Authority set the mandate for me to create a unique gateway that reflected aspects of the San Gabriel Valley region. As with all public art projects, it involved many conversations with the community, listening to their responses and incorporating their input in my preliminary sketches. Understandably, people in the community have a better intuition about local history, myths and legends. Their responses and reactions guided my steps. The crucial synthesis springs from this exchange of ideas, and the cycle is repeated eventually leading toward a final concept. Hopefully, the end result resonates with the community—a multi-layered composition that people perceive as once both clear and ambiguous.

I drew my inspiration from two sources: the region's cultural history and its architecture. The large baskets that adorn the bridge metaphorically represent the Native Americans of the region and the growth of agriculture as a primary catalyst to the San Gabriel Valley. They also pay tribute to the iconic sculptural traditions of Route 66 with its oversized commercial architecture such as the windmill atop the Denny's restaurant on Huntington Drive and the Maya restaurant on Foothill Boulevard north of the freeway. The bridge's baskets join this pantheon of larger-than-life artifacts.

The central theme of my design concept truly celebrates aspects of the early cultures of the San Gabriel Valley. In addition to celebrating these people, it seemed appropriate to reflect the centuries-old migratory history of the area. Prior to the Spanish missions, these ancient peoples traveled from the interior desert states and great basin areas along the San Gabriel Foothills on their way to the ocean.

Some of the most notable and recognizable artifacts of these people's culture are their elaborately designed baskets, which served both a utilitarian purpose and as valuable trading commodities. The baskets as artifacts have survived over the years and are highly prized. Their creation remains an ongoing tradition to this day.

The making of baskets and bridges share similar fabrication techniques. Both have an internal skeleton of interwoven linear material to describe the form, reed and rebar respectively, and filler and surfacing material to give rigidity—stem and clay for the basket and concrete for the bridge. Hence, the skeleton and its skin are manipulated to give expressive meaning as well as provide utility.

The basic bridge is comprised as a carriageway (where the train will run) that is supported by a cross beam across the I-210 freeway that is in turn supported by two vertical columns on either side of the freeway. This simple arrangement creates a giant de facto "post and lintel" doorway for eastbound motorists. Adding to its immensity is the serpentine carriageway, representing the Western Diamondback, above with its exposed "ribs."

Q: Can you explain your creative process for the Gold Line Bridge project?

AL: I did research for over a year, designing and presenting preliminary ideas to the Construction Authority in person and via emails and conference calls while also including feedback from a group of community stakeholders representing the corridor's cities from Pasadena to Montclair.

The original concept for the bridge included using a variety of materials. Following a Caltrans and Metro review; however, it was determined that the bridge should only be constructed in concrete for maintenance and safety reasons (soil borings had confirmed the existence of the active Raymond Fault

running directly underneath the bridge). Special seismic engineering required sinking foundations more than 100 feet down and beefing up the three main columns and adjusting the profile of the baskets and main crossbeam.

As is often the case with a public art process, an artist has to be prepared to start from scratch when there are material and design criteria that dictate the direction and constructionability of a project. These challenges are par for the course for public artists. I presented half a dozen ideas before the Construction Authority approved the final design concept.

The next task was to engineer the various components—the reeds, baskets and serpentine skeleton of the bridge—to pass a Caltrans review. The engineering crew addressed these intricacies well and understood how we would execute all the elements while still preserving the visual integrity. The architect Rivka Night's advice and amazing skills with the many complex computer drawings and calculations were crucial.

Q: What sort of inspiration do you hope the bridge will provide to the community?

AL: Route 66 (Foothill Boulevard) parallels the I-210 freeway. This “California Mother Road” has had an indelible effect on the minds of most Americans, giving birth to the quintessential American roadside attraction with its larger than life figures and quasi-architectural objects advertising a local attraction. As history moves ineluctably onwards, cultural shifts wipe out these cultural artifacts as well as traces of earlier peoples.

This monumental bridge with its supporting columns will be a symbolic gateway into the San Gabriel Valley as well as a tribute to and reminder of the earliest settlers that inhabited this spectacular landscape. In addition, it emphasizes to the traveler that they have arrived in a unique place—one of the driving principles behind the art program for the Foothill Extension.

At night, lights will illuminate the baskets, creating spectral sentinels for those who are driving along the freeway or taking the train—something passengers will look forward to as a landmark on their journeys. As I mentioned before, the average person does not ordinarily encounter art in their everyday environment. I want people to be intrigued by the mystery of it.

As with most ceremonial portals, the addition of symbolic and decorative elements serves a vital role in conveying a message to anyone who passes through. In this case, they announce the beginning of the San Gabriel Valley, and to those that live there, ‘you are not far from your destination.’ The bridge provides that warm, confident feeling of heading home.

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