

Mariana Aitches Davis: Mall could be a great mercado

Valley Voices

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By Mariana Aitches Davis

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As someone who recently moved to the Fresno area from San Antonio, Texas, I'm reluctant to argue with Craig Scharton, longtime downtown resident and businessman. I've been to his Peeve's Public House & Local Market, and was impressed by the staff, the artful ambience, and the commitment to local products. In his Feb. 11 op-ed, Scharton made a convincing appeal to facts. But one fact about the Fulton Mall received scant attention.

As an outsider, I want to call attention to Fresno's unique legacy on the Fulton Mall and encourage leaders in the arts and business communities to be aggressive in their promotion and protection of this amazing place.

Friends who are longtime Fresno residents took me there a few weeks ago. Since then, I've read extensively on the history of the mall. Particularly impressive was the historical commitment of the business community to the arts that resulted in the creation of such an astounding collection of public art.

Discovering the Fulton Mall was completed in 1964, I looked for plans for a 50-year anniversary celebration in 2014. Instead, I found a confusing array of arguments regarding the future of the mall, most apparently supporting the destruction of the original environment.

Scharton says that "option one" preserves all the sculptures. Will they all be present on the new, wide sidewalks? Does that include the fountains?

Even to me, a newcomer, it appears that the handwriting is on the wall. Local power brokers seem to have determined that Fresno will be the 171st city to restore traffic to the mall, as Scharton says. The TIGER grant has been secured.

Last July, Mayor Ashley Swearengin announced that a \$150,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant had been awarded for arts and landscape improvements to Mariposa Plaza. How does that project fit into the push to return traffic to the mall area?

Is there room for negotiation? Can creative ways be found to stimulate downtown business and ensure that Fresno's treasure trove of public art continues to be enjoyed by its citizens as well as visitors?

Respecting and marketing Fresno's unique and surprising collection of public art is not "nostalgia" — it is dignifying the visionary leadership of past Fresno citizens.

And it's good business, too. Recently, I took a visiting friend to the mall, and her reaction convinced me that people would go downtown if they knew what this city has. We bought delicious local products at Peeve's and ate a wonderful lunch. She was blown away by getting to see so much astonishing public art in a relatively small city.

Of course, we noticed the neglect. But we could easily imagine a mercado like the one in San Antonio, where locals shop alongside tourists. And we remember that city's downtown before San Antonio officials committed to providing a safe and beautiful environment.

Let's have a celebration! Maybe such a celebration will educate us all about Fresno's vibrant history and the essential role downtown plays. Isn't it appropriate after 50 years to recognize those civic and business leaders and artists who put Fresno on the national map?

Before the Fresno City Council decides to replace the present artscape with street traffic, let's party. Let's eat together. Let's look at all the art. Then we can talk about ways to get more people to travel south of Shaw Avenue on a regular basis.

After all, a 50th anniversary is not a small thing in a national culture where so little is preserved for so long.

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