

29 September 2025

Charles Collins, President, and Commissioners
San Francisco Arts Commission
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
Room 416
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear President Collins, and Commissioners:

[The Society of Architectural Historians \(SAH\)](#) joins a broad coalition of local, national, and international groups, including [Docomomo-US](#), [Docomomo-Northern California](#), [The Cultural Landscape Foundation \(TCLF\)](#) and others to strongly advocate for the preservation of the Embarcadero Plaza and the Vaillancourt Fountain in San Francisco, CA. We oppose the proposal to demolish these cultural resources as part of the *Embarcadero Plaza and Sue Bierman Park Renovation Project*, and instead urge the San Francisco Arts Commission (SFAC), the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department (SFRPD), and District Supervisors to preserve Embarcadero Plaza and Vaillancourt Fountain through adaptive reuse and project rightsizing.

As the leading scholarly organization for architectural historians in North America, SAH limits its advocacy to matters of national and international import. We assess such issues with rigor and deliberation, and do not speak without due consideration of a site's architectural and cultural significance. Design of the Embarcadero Plaza (1962-72) is credited to the world-renowned landscape architect Lawrence Halprin (1916–2009). Halprin is widely regarded as one of the most influential American landscape architects of the 20th century. As stated by The Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF), "Larry Halprin changed the profession of landscape architecture. Period."¹ During the twentieth century, and especially at a time when large urban projects were reshaping American cities, Halprin advocated for human-centric, dynamic landscapes that prioritized movement, participation, public access and environmental consciousness. Along with his associates, Don Carter, Mario J. Ciampi and John Bolles, Harpin envisioned Embarcadero Plaza as an integral part of a series of urban public spaces in the heart of San Francisco. Animating these spaces with art and sculpture was important to the design intent. Following an international design competition in 1967, noted Québécois sculptor, Armand Vaillancourt was selected to design the plaza fountain. The iconic and sculptural 40-foot fountain by Vaillancourt is a striking example of Brutalist ideals. In prior studies commissioned by the city of San Francisco, the plaza is noted as a contributing property within a larger significant Modern-era landscape (referred to as the Market Street Cultural Landscape District)², which is also eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.³ In 2024, the plazas was also noted in the *San Francisco Modern & Postmodern Architectural Styles (1960-2000) Historic Context Statement*.⁴

Together, the plaza and the fountain have architectural and historical significance, both within the context of San Francisco and at a national level. This project embodies the distinctive combination of water, public art and pedestrian space that is characteristic not only of Halprin's body of work but of modernist American plazas more broadly. **In short, San Francisco is fortunate to host this iconic site, and more importantly, responsible for its stewardship.**

Since opening in 1972, the Embarcadero Plaza and the Vaillancourt Fountain have been the place of public expression and participation. Vaillancourt Fountain has embodied freedom of expression and protest since its opening, when the designer Vaillancourt himself inscribed "Québec libre!" on it during its dedication, advocating for Québec independence.

This political expression, and numerous others since, including a free concert by the rock band U2 in 1987 that incited a debate about graffiti and artistic freedom, have made the site a symbol for continued public discourse and gathering. In the 1980s and 90s, the plaza played an important role in the development of skateboarding in San Francisco with impacts felt across the nation and beyond. Skater and art historian Ted Barrow notes that the plaza represents “the spiritual and historic heart of our [skateboarding] culture.”⁵

We recognize that historic places, however significant, need to change. And the Embarcadero Plaza and Vaillancourt Fountain have done just that. A renovation of the plaza was completed in 1983. After surviving the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989 and following demolition of the damaged Embarcadero Freeway in 1991, the Fountain and Plaza found themselves in a changed urban context. Initial plans to remove the plaza and fountain in the 1990s were rejected and the plaza was renovated in 2001. A proposal to demolish the fountain in 2004 was again met with protests. We urge the San Francisco Arts Commission to recognize the enduring appeal of the Embarcadero Plaza and Vaillancourt Fountain, that has only increased with the passage of time. We are now better able to appreciate them as exemplary and unique examples of modernist and brutalist design that have an important role to play in our shared architectural and urban legacy. This history of change also reminds us that initial proposals can and *should be* reworked based on public feedback. Options should be explored to right-size the project and preserve significant historic features while making new modifications.

We join our colleagues at Docomomo/US/NOCA and TCLF in advocating for a transparent and inclusive public review process. The San Francisco Arts Commission (SFAC) and the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department (SFRPD) have the opportunity to make this already iconic architectural legacy into a state-of-the-art redevelopment project that values preservation and helps carry significant examples of our past into the future.

We appreciate this opportunity to comment and hope that the Commission will take these remarks into consideration as they deliberate on the future of this site.

Sincerely,

SAH Heritage Conservation Committee

Priya Jain, AIA (Chair)

Fallon Aidoo, Ph.D.

Kenneth Breisch, Ph.D.

Pushpita Eshika, Ph.D.

Yannick Etoundi

Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D.

Suha Hasan, Ph.D.

Başak Kalfa, Ph.D.

Mary Rzepczynski

Mohammad Gharipour, Ph.D. (ex-officio member)

Ben Thomas, Ph.D. (ex-officio member)

¹ “Introduction: The Landscape Architecture of Lawrence Halprin,” The Cultural Landscape Foundation. Accessed September 29, 2025.

<https://www.tclf.org/sites/default/files/microsites/halprinlegacy/introduction.html>

² San Francisco Planning Department, *Better Market Street Draft EIR, Vol. II*, “Market Street Cultural Landscape District.”

<https://sfmea.sfplanning.org/Better%20Market%20Street%20Draft%20EIR%20-%20Vol%20II.pdf>

³ Page & Turnbull, *Embarcadero Plaza Historic Resources Review (HRR) Report* (prepared for San Francisco Planning Department, April 28, 2025), 7.

⁴ Page & Turnbull, *San Francisco Modern & Postmodern Architectural Styles (1960-2000) Historic Context Statement* (prepared for San Francisco Planning Department, August 21, 2024), 184.

⁵ Ted Barrow, “Opinion: Embarcadero Plaza is a Living Shrine to Skateboarding History — Don’t Desecrate It,” *The San Francisco Standard*, August 15, 2024.

<https://sfstandard.com/opinion/2024/08/15/skaters-mecca-embarcadero-plaza/>