Revised Proposal for Sebastopol Public Artwork
Ned Kahn, September 2020

Background

About four years ago, when I started working on this project, I was intrigued with the idea of celebrating the Laguna and the passage over water as one drives over the new bridge and enters Sebastopol. Upon learning that CalTrans had already installed 2 huge concrete piers at the eastern edge of the bridge for a future monument, I began sketching ideas for two vertical artworks that would function as a gateway. Over the next few years, my designs went through many twist and turns in response to comments from CalTrans, engineers, City of Sebastopol staff, the art committee, public input, etc. The design that was finally approved by CalTrans and their engineers called for two massive steel columns that would bolt to the existing piers and curve away from the roadway at the top where they would bifurcate into two branches that would support a large sheet of silver polycarbonate chainmail that would flutter in the wind. Due to cost increases in the price of metal and other factors, the bids for fabricating this design were disturbingly high, in excess of $250,000 and this did not include installation which would have required extensive use of large cranes and road closures, etc. All of these realizations sent me back to the drawing board.

New Approach

Approaching the project with fresh eyes, I had the insight that my fixation on using the piers that CalTrans installed was a mistake. These piers locked me into thinking about a vertical installation and ignoring the bridge itself, the real passage over water that I wanted to celebrate in the first place. This led me to think about an installation that would embrace the entire length of the bridge instead, where it spans the Laguna, creating an immersive environment that people would pass through, rather than a vertical sculpture. I strongly feel that this new approach is vastly better and more in harmony with the site than my previous proposals.

Turbulent Bridge

To facilitate the approval process with CalTrans, I have endeavored to use the exact same materials, finishes and shapes that they previously approved. What I have changed is the orientation, flipping the design from vertical to horizontal and following the line of the bridge. My new proposal is to fabricate a series of 10’ tall, stainless steel poles that will clamp to the existing concrete railing of the bridge and curve away from the roadway. Attached to the top of these poles will be a horizontal channel that will hold a 300’ long by 5’ tall curtain of the same silver, polycarbonate chainmail, one on each side of the bridge. Placing the kinetic curtain at this height leaves an unfettered view of the adjacent landscape from passing vehicles and pedestrians.

I have provided a link to a video of a recently completed public art project for a parking structure facade at the Convention Center in Columbus, Ohio. We covered this facade with three curtains of the same chainmail fabric that I am proposing for the bridge in Sebastopol. As you can see from the video, the fabric ripples in the wind like waves in the ocean. In addition to functioning as a sensitive, moment-to-moment register of the local wind conditions, the fabric also beautifully captures light and shadow, acting almost like a projection screen for the ambient light conditions. Sunlight during the day and vehicle headlights at night will illuminate the curtains with ever-changing patterns of light and shadow. Pulses of air from passing vehicles will ripple in the fabric. The artwork will become a real-time, kinetic register of the fluctuating forces in the bridge environment. My intent is to make the entire bridge into a cohesive confluence of art, infrastructure and nature.

In addition to being visible from passing vehicles and pedestrians on the bridge, the artwork will have great lines of sight from Tomodachi Park and the Laguna walking trail on the north side of the highway. We hope to install comfortable benches in one or both of these sites to encourage extended, relaxed observation of the kinetic bridge. When the Laguna fills with water, kayaking under and around the artwork will also be a rewarding experience.

My intent is to create an environment, rather than a sculpture, a place where people can have an immersive experience of the beauty and intricacy of the air we breathe. By increasing people's awareness and appreciation of the beauty of the wind, we offer the possibility of shifting our relationship with the atmosphere from thinking about it as a resource or dumping ground to falling deeply in love with it.