

Cityscape

Atlanta's Claim To Flame



PHOTOS BY LAURA NOEL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Artist Siah Armajani designed the Olympic Bridge between Olympic Stadium and the Centennial Olympic Cauldron. Below, one of the more than 2,000 new lampposts brightening major streets and avenues.

Art Spans the Gap Between Visions and Reality

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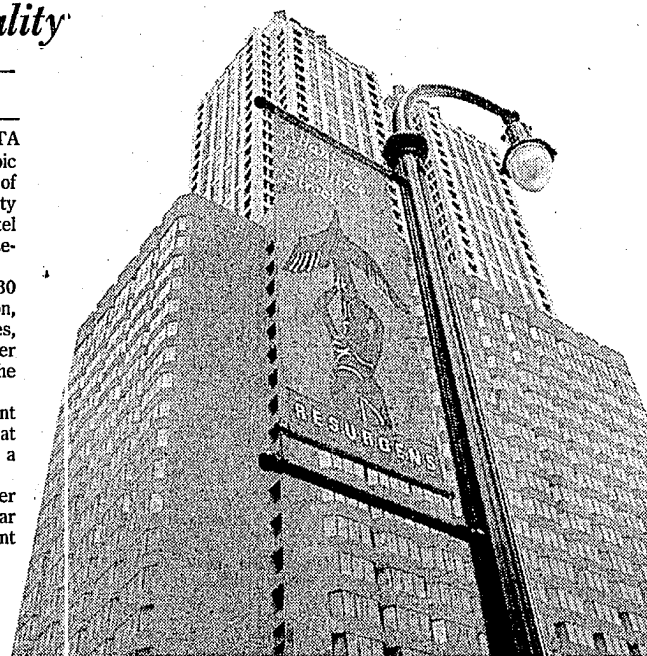
MY first glimpse of the Centennial Olympic Cauldron, the largest and most significant of the many public artworks placed in the city as a result of the Olympics, was the image on a hotel television screen during a broadcast of a Braves baseball game.

The camera gave a beautiful view, lasting about 30 seconds, focusing first on the red-painted cauldron, where the Olympic flame will burn during the Games, and then panning down the gray-painted steel tower and along the bridge connecting the structure to the Olympic Stadium.

The baseball announcers remained atypically silent until, at the end of the shot, one asked the other what he thought of the thing. "Well, I don't know," came a hesitant reply. "I guess I'll have to think about it."

This was a fitting response. What the announcer then *thought* about it I do not know, but it seems clear that when the subject is this very big, very prominent artwork, it is advisable to think before speaking.

See CAULDRON, D2, Col. 1



Cauldron Burns No Bridges

CAULDRON, From D1

Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG) President Billy Payne described the piece as "majestic." But that's not quite right. High Museum of Art Director Ned Rifkin said the work "will say to the world that Atlanta is a forward-thinking, progressive, innovative city." But that doesn't quite get it, either.

Conceived by Siah Armajani, a well-known 57-year-old Minneapolis artist who has long been fascinated with bridges, the work is an anomaly among the futuristic vertical monuments that events such as world expositions or the Olympics often inspire.

The 1889 Eiffel Tower comes readily to

mind, and the 1962 Seattle Space Needle. At the '92 Games, Barcelona built Europe's most stunning communications tower, designed by Sir Norman Foster of England. The city then commissioned famed Spanish engineer Santiago Calatrava to design what may be the *world's* most striking communications building, standing outside the Olympic Stadium and looking like a stupendous, high-tech spinning top.

Armajani's bridge and cauldron, by contrast, would seem to be looking backward as well as forward. His creation consists of a 111-foot-high structural steel tower, a side of which steps outward to form something of an "A" for Atlanta. The top platform supports the

cauldron, a 21-foot-tall ribbon of rolled steel that appears to be unfurling like a flag, or a flower. There's a little green-painted house on one of the platforms, with windows of glowing colored glass. The 190-foot-long bridge, with the five Olympic rings emblazoned on its sides, spans Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard to connect the tower to the stadium.

The steel members and trusses in this structure bear little resemblance to the graceful arches and bends of the Eiffel Tower. As do many Armajani pieces, this addition to Atlanta recalls simpler structures of the past—iron or wooden railroad bridges of the kind that had to be built to cross the valleys on the way to the city, a place that got its start simply because it was where the railroad stopped in 1837. (Atlanta was called Terminus back then.)

The artist was originally hired simply to de-

sign a cauldron and its support. He added the bridge, and this was a brilliant stroke.

For one thing, it solved a big aesthetic and practical problem. By necessity, the tower and cauldron had to be joined to the Olympic stadium, but the specific place to which it was to be attached was the bowl of seats that will be removed after the Games, when the stadium will be converted to a major league baseball park. This would have left the tower standing awkwardly and all alone in the middle of a plaza. Armajani's bridge, by contrast, will connect the tower to the ballpark—thus the piece will both stand apart from, and be a part of, a major new public facility.

Adding the bridge also enriches the allusive qualities of the work. The bridge can be seen as a symbolic connection to the past in a city that is obsessed with the future. ("Atlanta—the next international city" is the slogan you read and hear more than any other.) The

more obvious symbolism, of course, has to do with the event being commemorated: Just as the tower and cauldron stand as signals of the highest athletic aspirations, so does the bridge serve as a reminder of the Olympic ideal of bringing people and places together.

In this specific location—a megabucks sports enclave surrounded by poor neighborhoods—the bridge also might be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of inclusion. Or of aspirations yet to be met—another bridge to cross. And what about that strange little house? Is it a symbol of Southern hospitality and warmth? Or is more like an abandoned backwoods shack? Is it welcoming or scary, happy or sad?

Such questions obviously cannot be answered definitively, and usually are not asked in grand public monuments. Three cheers for Armajani for raising them in this quirky, clunky, splendid work.