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What to Look and Listen For Monumental Keeper of the Flame

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For the next 17 days, a remarkable sculpture will serve as a prominent emblem for the 1996 Olympic Games, which get underway Friday night with extravagant opening ceremonies. It's not the first work of art commissioned by an Olympic organizing committee in the last hundred years, since the ancient contest was revived for modern times; but it is certainly the first to be so prominent an emblem for the quadrennial event.

It may also be the best. This magnificent sculpture creates a civic landmark--Atlanta's Eiffel Tower.

The Centennial Olympic Cauldron is a monumental structure designed to house the Olympic flame during the Games and to remain as an imposing presence long after. Jettisoning common precedents, it is unlike any other cauldron that has come before.

Typically, past Olympic cauldrons have been one of two basic kinds. A hand-held torch was simply made gigantic, in keeping with the modern faith that bigger is better. Or, it was a dish-on-a-stick, in which a broad, low-slung bowl is perched atop a pedestal. That design married a romantic vision of antique purity to a promise of futuristic glory.

The old designs served their purposes, but who among us anymore believes the tired fantasies they proposed? Certainly not Siah Armajani, the American artist who has dramatically swept them away. Instead he's given us a stunning emblem for our time--a progressive sculptural image at once playful, profound, Pop in its multileveled vocabulary of forms and flat-out startling to see.

Armajani, who was born in Tehran in 1939 and emigrated to the United States in 1960, is perhaps the finest sculptor working today in the treacherous field of public art. He's made extraordinary public works in Los Angeles (at the Lannan Foundation), New York and Minneapolis, where he's based. Now, add Atlanta to the list.

Capped with a two-story, flame-shaped cauldron of painted stainless steel, the 111-foot-tall, free-standing tower is constructed from gray steel in an open truss-work format reminiscent of a child's Erector set or the innards of a skyscraper--shades of Gustave Eiffel's 1889 structure, built just before another Frenchman revived the ancient Olympic Games.

A simple wooden house, painted dark green, is embedded in the tower's first level. There, a 190-foot-long bridge spanning four lanes of traffic on Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard connects the tower to the stadium. A zig-zagging staircase winds around the tower, creating viewing platforms on all four sides, while a stabilizing support structure slams into one side at a dramatic angle.

The bridge, staircase and angled strut visually animate the sculpture. From across the asphalt parking lot the Centennial Cauldron looks rather like a colossal transformer--one of those popular sci-fi toys for kids, in which a race car or a spaceship mechanically unfolds to metamorphose into a forbidding robot warrior.

Sure enough, a variety of familiar images have been merged into the sculpture. Playfully, it's part diving platform, part Russian Constructivist-style information kiosk.

The bridge design evokes the great age of the American railroad, which is the historic reason Atlanta is located where it is. And the tall structure is reminiscent of a radar tower, a familiar sight at a modern airport, which in Atlanta has replaced the railroad as local transportation miracle.

The painted cauldron's shape looks like a flame, which will recall its original function to generations that come along after the Olympic torch has moved on. Its gracefully unfurling form also suggests the opening bud of a flower--physical beauty coming into full bloom.

The green house, simply built from four walls and a peaked roof, is straight from a Monopoly game. Hoisted in the air as a domestic link between the bridge to the stadium and the staircase to the cauldron's flame, it pivots between a homely image of hospitality and a childhood symbol of economic gamesmanship.

After all, sports stadiums in America typically are built in low-income neighborhoods, where real estate costs are minimized and surrounding residents are usually without a persuasive political voice. Atlanta's Olympic Stadium, located in a poor neighborhood just outside the central business district, is no exception.

Armajani's Centennial Olympic Cauldron seems determined to keep in mind the exclusions that come with privilege. Like any great democratic monument, and in keeping with the Games' origin in ancient Greece, his flame has been designed to burn brightly in the polis.

So perhaps the most remarkable and effective design decision the artist made concerned the sculpture's placement. The Olympic Cauldron is not inside the stadium, nor even poised on the stadium's rim. This crucial symbol is fully outside, in the public parking lot. The flame and the tower's upper portions can easily be seen from inside, but you don't need a ticket to see the sculpture. Anyone can come and look. It's a truly public monument.

Acrophobe that I am, I still longed to run across that bridge and climb those thrilling stairs (officials said, politely, no). That's OK. We'll all get to watch as Friday night's torchbearer enjoys that redoubtable fun.

PHOTO: Siah Armajani's Centennial Olympic Cauldron: A civic landmark.; PHOTOGRAPHER: GEORGE HEINRICH