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Eye-Catching Art Draws in Prospective Real Estate Buyers Investing in Sculptures And Fountains May Pay Off in Units Sold

By NED RANDOLPH

Commuters speeding along Interstate 5 near Del Mar may not give much thought to an office project that was completed in December were it not for a 40-foot-tall sculpture in its courtyard that can be seen from the highway.

The piece, its developers believe, will give **Gateway at Torrey Hills**, a two-building, 200,000-square-foot office complex in Del Mar Heights, that intangible sense of place that eventually pays off in the long term.

“It just really puts the project on the map and makes it a known location,” said Jason Wood, project developer for San Diego-based Cisterra Partners LLC, which built Gateway, an \$83 million project. “I think the project may be more defined in the future for that sculpture piece than any name we put on it.”

Designers are always looking for some kind of creative element that separates their project from the pack, which is becoming more critical in a challenging real estate market.

But the decision to commission original artwork requires a level of investment and willingness to take a risk for the good of the project, said Brian Paul, chief executive officer of the architecture firm Brian Paul & Associates Inc. of San Diego, which designed Gateway.

“A lot of times, some clients simply don’t want to, or are incapable of, coming up with the front money,” said Paul, whose firm has 15 employees. “Often it needs to be a client that has (money) and is willing to take the risk associated with expending it out.”

Paul said the developers wanted some signature artwork that would not only complement the curvature of the twin Gateway buildings, but also be large enough to be appreciated from the highway.

We wanted something important to occur there,” said Paul, who had contacted Colorado artist Kevin Robb and requested samples of his work.

Though Cisterra Partners wouldn’t



Cisterra Partners chose this artwork for its Gateway at Torrey Hills. From left, architect Brian Paul; Cisterra Partners’ Steve Black; sculptor Kevin Robb; and Cisterra Partners’ Jason Wood.

disclose the price, similar sized pieces by Robb cost around \$400,000, said Diane Robb, his wife.

“Can we raise the rents because of that sculpture piece? I would probably say no,” said Wood, vice president of Cisterra, which has 11 employees in San Diego. “But I do

think it helps us achieve full occupancy and stay at a high-occupancy level.

“Will it achieve dollars? I think, yes, through longer-term high-occupancy rather than rental rates,” he added.

“They chose a piece along the lines of what they wanted, and pretty well gave

Kevin free rein as long as it was basically in that genre,” said Diane Robb, who has managed the art practice for her husband since his stroke four years ago.

The result was “Dancing in the Sun,” a tall piece of artwork made of weaving boxes of stainless steel, which has etched sides that capture various reflections from the sun’s rays.

The piece is meant to convey lightness and fluidity, motion and drama.

“There’s a lot of tension there in that piece,” said Robb, whose husband works without the use of speech and his right hand.

The piece took six months to create. Its metal sheets were cut by a water jet cutter and fed into a roller. The sides were etched and welded together.

“It was assembled here in Denver because all of the pieces aren’t just welded edge to edge, but cut into the next piece,” said Diane Robb. “We did all of that here, then took it all apart and shipped it on a flatbed truck in four pieces. When we got to the job site we put them back together, welded all the intersections and grounded it down.”

Robb said that her husband has been a sculptor for 30 years, designing 6-foot-tall pieces for individuals and larger pieces for commercial projects, which she says makes a profound impact.

“It’s huge. We have pictures of the development without the sculpture,” she said. “The development is beautiful — and I can only speak very highly of Cisterra Partners. When you put a 30-foot sculpture between these two main buildings, it’s the icing on the cake. It puts the final touch to it.”

Ambience Carries Weight

When the real estate market will only bear so much in rent or price per square foot, ambience can help tip the scales.

“With there being a bit of inventory on the market, when people go around they’re looking for something to stand out,” said Erica Cole, a sales associate at Icon, a mixed use retail-residential project by developer Paul Menzies built next to Petco Park.

Icon is one of many new residential projects in downtown San Diego. Its 327 units are 90 percent occupied — a relative feat amid a collapsing housing market; and one its sales team attributes to features apart from floor plans.

“Icon leaves an impact on everybody,” she said. “There are so many unique features of the art.”

A courtyard that connects Icon’s four buildings is dotted with art pieces, including a kinetic sculpture, called “Confluence,” which has chrome arms that stir in the breeze. Two opposite walls in the courtyard are draped with art by Ned Kahn — tapestrylike sculptures with fluttering sequins that mimic sea waves.

Inside, the lobby is partitioned by a pair of 11-foot-by-7-foot original Japanese room partitions, called Shoji screens, suspended from the ceiling. The building is



Matt Reid

also capped by a skybox, located on the 26th floor rooftop, with concrete bleachers looking down into the ballpark.

“The whole theme with the name being Icon is that the developer wanted something unique that stands out in the city,” Cole said. “It carries to a theme of art that you don’t see anywhere else.”

Making A Difference

The concept seems to be working. More than 260 units have closed, although it’s taken four years and tireless vigilance to keep the units in escrow, said salesman Glenn Arsenault.

“To be a developer these days you can’t just build buildings and pave the parking lot,” said Matthew Reid, general contractor on the RiverView master-planned development with office, retail and residential components in Santee.

“Everything comes down to the bottom dollar, but I think (art) does make a difference,” said Reid, who heads the 11-employee San Diego office of Ryan Cos. US Inc., a \$1 billion company. “It’s the right thing to do to incorporate art into a development, and it also enhances the project.”

At its main entrance, RiverView features a dramatic multilevel water fountain that cost more than \$250,000, Reid said.

The feature, designed by the landscape architecture firm Gillespie Moody Patterson Inc., took several months to design and complete, said Reid.

“We really wanted to take time and do it the right way,” he said. “It’s a special corner and needed something spectacular. I think we accomplished that.”