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Let Christo in, Colorado

Opinion

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By Don Marostica

Several months ago, I attended a meeting with the artist Christo and his team to discuss the status of his "Over the River" project. I went into the meeting without expectations. Of course, I knew of Christo and his famous, massive works of art installed in cities and coastlines around the world. But I had no knowledge about the level of detail and planning in Christo's creations.

I can only describe the experience this way: It was as though I had entered the design room of a major real estate developer, where the brain trust included a visionary, an architect, a designer, an engineer and a general contractor — and they all had morphed into one man. Christo is the driving force, the entrepreneur who dreams big dreams, but supports those dreams with sound and solid business strategies and practices.

If Christo were any less a businessman, engineer, architect, politician, negotiator, visionary and leader, his stunning artwork would never have been realized here or around the world. He is also a savvy businessman, who sees the big picture first. Yes, Christo's heart is in his artistic vision, but his head is focused on the practical details, years in the planning and with scrupulous attention to details and execution.

The details include determining the perfect site for his design, building consensus within community after community, working with local governments to address the land use governance and environmental concerns, and designing structures that will hold up safely in any weather.

The artist and his team know the placement of every bolt and rivet. They design fixtures to flow through the landscapes, mountain and riverbank. The sum of the parts is greater than the whole and deliberately, painstakingly designed for installation in the context of its environment.

That there is controversy over Christo's "Over the River" is a puzzle. That Christo and his late wife chose this beautiful section of the Arkansas River in Colorado is really more a cause for celebration than concern. After all, they traveled 14,000 miles visited 89 rivers in the Rocky Mountains before choosing the run between Salida and Cañon City as the perfect spot for the temporary art.

It has been 17 years in the planning, and will take two years to realize the artist's vision in streaks of silver, reflecting sky and cloud, water and red rock. The river will still run, summer, winter, spring and fall. Nature and the artist's vision will be captured forever in digital images and in the mind's eye of those who see it.

Once the installation is disassembled, nature will forever reclaim the land, but because of Christo, it will never be the same in the mind's eye.

All this comes as a gift — at no cost to Colorado taxpayers. Christo and his collaborators will obtain every permit and work through every detail with sensitivity to the environment. They made adjustments to the original plan after listening to the people who make their living fishing and rafting the Arkansas.

Citizens the world over have made Christo and his vision welcome. They have recognized the priceless attention it would bring and the lasting value of the imagery before, during and forever after Christo's metal and fabric have vanished.

These stunning works have brought glorious attention from California to Florida, Central Park in New York to Paris and Berlin. The imagery is so startling and glorious that a certain communication company has created a television ad that creates the floating imagery with computers instead of fabric.

Art critic David Bourdon describes Christo's work in familiar landscapes as "revelation through concealment." There's no doubt that "Over the River" will be a revelation and an inspiration now and for many years to come.

And the Arkansas River will still run through the Rockies, made nobler as revealed through the artist's eyes.

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