

We might be overthinking this whole thing about what to do with Tacoma's 110-year-old totem pole.

It's good, of course, that the city's volunteer landmarks and arts commissions are analyzing how to respond to news that the eight-story pole suffers from rot and insect infestation. They have dual jurisdiction because it is both a protected landmark and part of the city's art collection.

But they so far seem to be approaching it from an overly self-conscious viewpoint that is equal parts political correctness and cultural correctness. Based on stories written by our city government reporter, Lewis Kamb, the current sentiment is leaning toward removing the pole from Fireman's Park on the edge of downtown and laying it to rest in some park where it can decompose in peace.

"I think there's something very beautiful about the idea of the pole laying in the ground decaying and becoming part of the earth again," said Landmarks Commissioner JD Elquist.

That might be appropriate, even beautiful, for something that is a sacred object, something that is legitimately a Native American artifact. That reportedly is what tribes in Alaska and southwestern Canada would do with similar poles.

But we'd be better off, and likely make better decisions, if we stopped seeing the pole for what it isn't and understood it for what it is. This isn't art or a Native American artifact. It's kitsch. It's a fabulous illustration of turn-of-the-century Western American boosterism.

"It is an artifact of the city's cultural and commercial history," said David Nicandri, the former director of the Washington State Historical Society. "It is an example of the city's outlook on itself and its rivalry with another city at a time when the outcome of that rivalry was still in doubt."

It started in 1899 when Seattle stole a 60-foot totem from an Alaskan native village and placed it in its commercial core. Tacoma boosters - led by the biggest of big-businessmen, Chester Thorne - hoping to one-up the city's rival, decided to act. A cedar tree donated by the St. Paul & Tacoma Lumber Co. was sent to Quartermaster Harbor where two Native American carvers created sections based on Haida and Tlingit iconography.

It was then erected in front of the jewel of downtown, The Tacoma Hotel, just in time for the visit of then-President Teddy Roosevelt.

Was it meant to be a sacred place for tribal ceremonies? Of course not. It was meant to be a proclamation that Tacoma was, in fact, the City of Destiny. And locals were proud of it. Photos in the Tacoma Library's Northwest Room collection show Daffodil Festival princesses, traveling troubadours and Shriners in their parade cars all posing beneath the pole. In 1948, Tacoma steelworkers put up a scaffold so the Painters Union could repaint the pole one Sunday to the

accompaniment of a band of union musicians.

Does its commercial and pedestrian nature make it unworthy of landmark status? Of course not. It is exactly the kind of item that helps tell a story about the town's early aspirations. It might not belong in the city's art collection, but it certainly must remain on its historic register.

Come on, have some fun. Don't be embarrassed to advocate spending a few thousand dollars to shore it up and keep it where it is (especially since taking it down, securing a place for it to "return to the earth" and installing interpretive displays will probably cost as much if not more).

If it can't be kept standing, then move it indoors where it can be anchored to a wall or other structure. Seattle's history museum is fine with displaying pop culture items like Chief Skookum, the cigar store Indian that spent much of its life in front of a Tacoma tobacco store, and a stuffed gorilla named Bobo because both help tell a story.

But if Tacoma officials can't be comfortable with their own piece of kitschy vernacular folk art, give it to someone who gets it. Maybe McMenamins. Maybe the new Bass Pro Shops store.

When I first told Nicandri about the notion of laying it somewhere to decompose, he was skeptical but scholarly.

"That's kind of noble but overly sentimental given the commercial origins of the piece." But later, when he got warmed up, he was more blunt.

"Laying it in the woods somewhere, quite honestly, I consider that stupid. And you can quote me."

So I did.

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CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

PETER CALLAGHAN; Staff writer, 'Tacoma's totem: Sometimes a pole is just a pole', *News Tribune, The* (online), 19 May 2013 1 <<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/14670B523358E1D8>>

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