

Tsereteli Statue Finding U.S. Home

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Tsereteli's "Birth of a New Man" in Seville, Spain, is a companion piece to the homeless "Birth of a New Man." **Paco Abato Helguera**

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — A proposal to erect a colossal statue of Christopher Columbus on an uninhabited island near Puerto Rico has revived a debate about the fate of a bronze work that has been in search of a home for two decades.

The 126-meter-tall statue weighs 600 tons and features Columbus at the wheel of a miniature ship with three billowing sails behind him. It was built in 1991 by Moscow-based sculptor Zurab Tsereteli to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus' 1492 arrival in the Western Hemisphere.

A Puerto Rican legislator submitted a proposal last month to set up the statue on the tiny island of Desecheo, just west of Puerto Rico. The statue is more than twice the size of the Statue of Liberty without its pedestal.

In response, a spokeswoman for the artist said permits are nearly completed to assemble the statue along Puerto Rico's north coast as originally planned.

But then a new proposal surfaced: San Juan Mayor Jorge Santini said he would consider setting up the statue somewhere in the island's capital.

"Everything will depend on the conditions," Santini said. "If it's viable and appealing for the city and the economy, we will erect it."

He proposed three sites: atop an old landfill near a busy highway, near a lagoon in the high-end neighborhood of Condado or close to a bridge near the international airport.

The statue has been homeless for two decades, with several U.S. cities including New York, Miami and Baltimore having refused to accept it for reasons ranging from cost to appearance. Some people have said the arms are too long, the head too small and the one-handed greeting pose silly.

The creation, titled "Birth of a New World," has a companion piece in Seville, Spain. It features Columbus standing inside an egg and is titled, "Birth of a New Man." Tsereteli's works have often sparked controversy with their epic proportions and dramatic imagery.

Puerto Rico accepted the mammoth Columbus statue as a gift in 1998, using \$2.4 million in public funds to bring it to the island after a former mayor envisioned it as the main attraction for Catano, a seaside suburb of San Juan. But officials said it would block airplane flight paths while residents protested plans to demolish homes to make room for it.

In 2008, port management company Holland Group Ports Investments agreed to take the statue and place it in storage in Mayaguez.

In recent months, welders have arrived from Russia to assemble the statue and make sure the pieces fit together, Emily Madoff, Tsereteli's spokeswoman, said by phone.

The plan is to erect the statue on private land in the northern coastal town of Arecibo using \$20 million in private funds, she said. The permits to install the statue in Arecibo are still pending, and it is unclear where the process stands. Calls to the mayor of Arecibo and other government agencies went unanswered.

"We're thrilled that there's so much excitement now about the statue," Madoff said. "We've been working for many years to find a location for it in Puerto Rico."

But Madoff said she does not foresee the statue being erected in San Juan.

"I think it's very flattering," she said. "[Tsereteli] is thrilled he's having such a warm reception from the mayor, but it's large. I'm not aware that there's enough space in San Juan."

Legislator David Bonilla said he will keep pushing for the statue to be erected in Desecheo.

It would provide an economic boost for Puerto Rico's western region, said Bonilla, who envisions pictures, T-shirt sales and even helicopter rides linked to the statue.

He dismissed concerns that the permit process to move the statue to Arecibo is nearly complete.

"Everything is negotiable," he said. "It all depends on the effort that is made."

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