

## **Nick Fish: A Link in Many Human Chains**

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The late Commissioner Nick Fish has been memorialized in many ways—housing and homeless advocate, arts supporter, parks leader, the consummate politician (in a good way)—but another worthy title would be fan boy. Nick had enthusiasm, but *enduring* enthusiasms, one of which became the Portland Open Space Sequence, the quartet of fountain plazas designed in the 1960s by Lawrence Halprin and Associates.

The relationship began in September 2008, with Nick's head and shoulders, as usual, poking above the crowd following the "The City Dance of Lawrence and Anna Halprin," a series of dance and music performances that flowed through, between and sometimes in the fountains. Performed by Third Angle New Music Ensemble and a quartet of local experimental choreographers and inspired by the groundbreaking '60s-era collaborations of Anna and Lawrence and their circle of artists like Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Morton Subotnik, the performance drew an unlikely parade of more than 400 viewers for two cycles through the parks. It culminated with audience holding hands and circling dancers disrobing and re-robing around the most southward plaza, the tiny Source Fountain. And there was Nick, one of the tallest links in the human chain, outfitted in his usual slightly pressed version of East Coast casual, holding hands with everyone else.

For years after, every time Nick introduced me to someone at a gathering, my title was "the guy who helped create City Dance." The monograph I co-wrote on the Halprin Fountains sat front and center on the coffee table in his office. And when a fledgling group of us calling ourselves the Halprin Landscape Conservancy began a campaign to better care for and eventually restore the fountains, Nick became our most effective and loyal political supporter. We began with a simple adopt-a-block program where neighboring property owners could offer additional cleaning and garbage pick-up beyond what the city could afford.

Soon, we were doing even bigger work: taking down whole trees and aggressively pruning others in the long over-foliated Pettygrove Park. The rolling berms, denuded of grass because of too much shade, became the welcoming, sun-dappled place we know today. In 2014, a simple amendment to that agreement helped complete a \$220,000 restoration of the iconic curvilinear shelter at Lovejoy Fountain designed by the great Charles Moore.

But with failing pumps, lights long shut down because of aging seals, and brick and concrete work weathered and uplifted by tree roots, the Sequence needed much more help. The landscape architect and Conservancy co-founder Steven Koch developed a comprehensive needs study for all four plazas, estimating about \$2.2 million of work. We proposed a public-private partnership, imagining a traditional private fundraising campaign. But Nick had a better idea: why not develop a Local Improvement District, in which surrounding property owners would voluntarily tax themselves to raise the necessary funds? The city bonds the money allowing the property owners to pay their share, all up front or spread out, up to 20 years.

This financial instrument had never been applied to a park, much less a restoration of one. From the moment the light bulb flared over Nick's head to the restoration's completion took seven long years of negotiations—with the owners and the city. Our original scope shrunk while costs went up. A switch in parks commissioners changed our plan to privately complete the work; it became a city project.

As Nick took the helm of the Portland Parks again in September 2019, he got to show up to the ribbon-cutting of the \$4-million private-public partnership he did so much to start. The Portland Open Space Sequence's fountains are flowing fuller. The lights are back on. The concrete and bricks are fixed.

Shortly, before Larry Halprin died back in 2009, I was able to get him and Anna Halprin to sign a few copies of our monograph. I gave one to Nick. As he turned to the page with their incandescent signatures, he beamed like a kid who had just been handed a gift that he never imagined he wanted. Small gestures mattered: Nick made them all the time and accepted them with heart.

Thanks, Nick, for joining the human chain of a dance performance on a sunny fall day—and then building one between the city and the private sector to give these landmark fountains the love they so richly deserve.