

Help Protect and Preserve Cheesman Park Landmarks

by DeAnne Minner

Cheesman Park is home to three highly recognizable structures: a rustic Japanese Tea House, also known as the Rustic Shelter; the Cheesman Memorial which offers spectacular mountain views; and the Cheesman Fountains, reflective pools that grace the western side of the Pavilion. Although these features deserve to be protected as historic treasures, they are instead constantly under assault by deliberate and negligent behaviors of park users. Perhaps a little background and education will help curtail the negative effects these behaviors have on Cheesman's landmarks.

Rustic Shelter

As explained in the Cheesman Park Master Plan, the Rustic Shelter was one of four small-scale structures envisioned by Cheesman's master landscape architect Reinhard Schuetze in his 1902 plan. These were likely considered "follies," providing interest and offering moments of shade and rest. Of the four structures envisioned, only the Rustic Shelter was built in the north meadow in 1906. In keeping with its name, the Rustic Shelter was designed in a rustic naturalistic style popular at the time, in contrast with the formality of Schuetze's concept for the Pavilion site.

Over the years the Rustic Shelter fell into extreme disrepair. It was painstakingly restored and reinstalled in April 2006, but it was quickly vandalized when delicately curved arm- and backrests made of elm tree branches were literally torn off and carted away. Denver Parks, with community support, then installed in-ground security lighting to help protect the structure. These failed their intended purpose, however, as vandals filled the light-fixture holes with dirt to snuff out their illumination. Consequently, the rustic shelter is in as bad or worse condition than it was before restoration.

Cheesman Memorial

According to the Cheesman Park Master Plan, the idea of an iconic pavilion set on the park's high ground and designed in keeping with City Beautiful principles first appeared in Reinhard Schuetze's 1898 park design. The Cheesman Memorial, more commonly known as the Pavilion, was built as a memorial to business tycoon Walter Scott Cheesman in 1910. The formally arranged Pavilion and its gardens were a dramatic contrast to Schuetze's curvilinear park road and flowing trails. Reminiscent of the Greek Parthenon, the neoclassical structure is constructed of Colorado Yule marble and is one of 27 great landmarks designated within the City and County of Denver. It crowns the east end of Cheesman Park.

Having suffered the effects of age and weather, the Pavilion is slated for repair and preservation work made possible by \$100,000 in Better Denver Bond funds. In addition, \$195,000 from State Historic funds has been granted to the project to significantly expand stone repair work. These improvements will help preserve this treasured amenity for years to come. Work includes repair and preservation to the structure's stone,

including sealing compounds, as well as repairing the roof and mechanical/electrical code upgrades for the basement. Construction will begin in late fall 2010 with completion scheduled by June 2011.

This work will be compromised, however, if skateboarding in and around the Pavilion continues – a prohibited activity as stated in on-site signage. Made of hard plastic or polyurethane, skateboard wheels cause serious damage to the Pavilion’s marble floors and stairs. Marble, in spite of its reputation as a durable construction material, is soft stone. That’s why it’s commonly used as a sculptor’s medium and why skateboard wheels leave scratches and pits in the stone. Let’s not undo the much-needed restoration of this iconic structure: Skateboarders are respectfully asked to refrain from practicing their sport in or around the Pavilion.

Cheesman Fountains

Cheesman Park’s Master Plan tells us that George Kessler, with Marean and Norton Architects, brought Schuetze’s park design to reality, including fountains as an integral part of the Pavilion feature. Sited in a formal landscape, they crafted an integrated holistic design where building plus landscape worked as one. To the west of the Pavilion, Kessler sited a long reflecting pool, divided into three individual pools with water jets at each end – the Cheesman Fountains.

Due to drought conditions and a perception that fountains waste water, for several years the Cheesman Fountains did not operate. Park users increasingly missed them, and they were restored to service thanks to citizen advocacy. Today the fountains’ operations are not free of peril, however, due to dogs and people that jump into the inviting pools on hot summer days.

According to Parks and Recreation Facility Superintendent Harry Hill, at the time the fountains were constructed water filters rather than water-treatment equipment were used to clean the water. When dogs jump into the fountains, their hair clogs these filters and nozzles, which is time-consuming and expensive to remove. Dirt, oils and other material in dogs’ coats pollute the water. People who jump into the fountains contribute dirt and body oils as well. Even excrement is occasionally found in fountain water. As can be seen, dogs and people in fountains lead to maintenance and health issues.

How You Can Help

Because vandalism of the Rustic Shelter was deliberate, it illustrates how shamefully public property can be desecrated and how public money can be spent to no avail when segments of the public disrespect communal spaces. Skateboard damage to the Pavilion and dog hair in the Cheesman Fountains may be unintentional, but they are negligent and result in a greater need for maintenance and repairs that could be easily avoided.

The Denver Municipal Code prohibits damaging public property and entry into public fountains, so these behaviors are destructive *and* illegal. Yet Denver's code

enforcement is not always rigorously applied and improvements are unlikely given the current economic climate. Consequently it falls largely to us – park users and neighborhood residents – to safeguard these landmarks.

What can we do?

1. If you see deliberate acts of vandalism, call the Police Department non-emergency number (720-913-2000, option #1) to report your observations. Collect any identifying information you can, such as taking a photo on your cell phone or getting a license plate number.
2. If you see dogs in the fountains, explain to dog owners the consequences of their action and ask them politely to remove their animals from the water. If they are uncooperative, call 311 and ask that an Animal Control officer be dispatched to the park. This same procedure applies for reporting off-leash dogs.
3. If you see skateboarders using the Pavilion, politely explain the damaging effects of skateboard wheels on soft marble surfaces and ask them to find other places to skateboard. If they fail to cooperate with your request, threaten to call the Police Department non-emergency number above and do it if necessary.

By being diligent and working with City agencies and officials, our efforts can make a difference to protect and preserve Cheesman's historic landmarks for the enjoyment of generations to come.

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