

The New York Times

Long-Overshadowed Bay Bridge Will Go From Drab Gray to Glowing

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Published: March 4, 2013



The western span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge is illuminated by a light sculpture by Leo Villareal.

SAN FRANCISCO — For decades the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge has been considered, when it is considered at all, as a headache for commuters and a place not to be in an earthquake.



Mr. Villareal operates the lights from his computer.

But that reputation is set to change Tuesday night when the artist Leo Villareal will switch on what is being billed as the world's largest L.E.D. light sculpture. The public art installation, "The Bay Lights," will illuminate the bridge's 1.8-mile western span with 25,000 undulating white lights.

"My inspiration comes from the motion around the bridge, the kinetic activity of boats, water, clouds, traffic," Mr. Villareal said.

From a distance, it will appear as a shimmering illuminated mass, but Mr. Villareal controls each light individually with a software program he developed. He turns the whole thing on and off from his laptop.

Mr. Villareal's ability to fuse technology into his art is particularly apt here in a city awash in new tech wealth and buzzing with the frenetic energy of start-ups and highly caffeinated computer programmers.

The light sculpture, which will be on every night for two years, has become a darling of moneyed Silicon Valley types. The project is privately financed and is estimated to cost some \$8 million.

Already restaurants with bridge views are booked and boat cruise operators are creating new tours for viewing the glowing infrastructure. Organizers estimate the lights will bring in \$97 million to the local economy.

The unlikely star of all this fawning attention is the unassuming Bay Bridge.

When it opened to traffic Nov. 12, 1936, the city celebrated with five days of parades, a Navy air show and a regatta.

But just five months later, the Golden Gate Bridge followed with its flashier, red-painted steel spanning the more picturesque mouth of the bay. It quickly became an international tourist destination, while the Bay Bridge toiled along in utilitarian, gray obscurity. Last year some 40 million cars crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, while the Bay Bridge carried more than 100 million cars.

"These bridges really came up as twin sisters, one quite beautiful and one very hard working," said Ben Davis, who originally approached Mr. Villareal about adorning the bridge in lights. As founder of the agency responsible for branding on the newly constructed, \$6.4 billion eastern span of the Bay Bridge, Mr. Davis has spent years thinking about the bridge's legacy. "This project will elevate the Bay Bridge, at least for a while, above the Golden Gate Bridge," he said.

When both bridges recently celebrated their 75th anniversaries, San Francisco showered the Golden Gate Bridge in an elaborate fireworks show while the Bay Bridge's birthday went by seemingly unnoticed. The Bay Bridge has also suffered other, graver, setbacks along the way.

In the 1989 [Loma Prieta earthquake](#), a section of the bridge's eastern span collapsed, killing a driver and closing the bridge for a month. Since then the bridge has undergone a series of seismic retrofits, including the new eastern span scheduled to open later this year.

While the sheer size of “The Bay Lights” installation is a first for San Francisco, in recent years many cities across the world have hosted contemporary public art projects writ large, sometimes very large.

The artist Olafur Eliasson’s “The Waterfalls,” went up in New York in 2008 and featured four man-made waterfalls, some as tall as 120 feet (cost: \$15 million). In 2005, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s “The Gates,” had Central Park draped in one million square feet of saffron-colored fabric (cost: \$21 million).

Nicholas Baume, director of the Public Art Fund, a New York based nonprofit organization, said of “The Bay Lights,” “What this project confirms for me is the wide recognition that when you invite artists to participate in creating works for all kinds of urban public places, it adds tremendous vitality to those cities.”

Mr. Villareal, 46, is best known for large-scale light sculptures that are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Though he now lives in New York City, Mr. Villareal started his career in Silicon Valley. In the 1990s, he worked at the Interval Research Corporation, a technology company in Palo Alto, Calif., started by Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft. Mr. Villareal designed his first light sculpture in 1997 for [Burning Man](#), an arts festival in the Nevada desert.

The tech industry has given generously to the project despite a reputation for being closefisted when it comes to philanthropy.

Marissa Mayer, chief executive at Yahoo, is among the project’s patrons. Ron Conway, one of Silicon Valley’s most prolific investors, described the bridge in its natural state as “bland,” so he donated some \$50,000. Paul Buchheit, an early Google employee who created the first version of Gmail gave about \$250,000.

For Mark Pincus, chief executive of Zynga, maker of online games like Farmville, and his wife, Alison, donating money and organizing fund-raisers also offered a private perk; they can see the light sculpture from their San Francisco home.

Some arts groups are encouraged by Silicon Valley’s support for the project. “I’m hopeful that this is a sign that all the wealth in the tech sector will mean a new wave of investment in public art,” said Tom DeCaigny, director of cultural affairs for the San Francisco Arts Commission.

And while patrons prepare for celebratory cocktail parties with prime bridge views, the lights will also be visible, for free.

“The great thing about public arts is it does not cost anything to see,” Mr. Baume said. “There are no tickets for admission, it is there for everybody.”