

Mural to revive the memories of Key System

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It's been 50 years since the last Key System train left Oakland for San Francisco.

But the memory of the late, fondly remembered electric rail system will live on in a giant, 20-by-80-foot mural at the base of the former Key System headquarters building on 11th Street in downtown Oakland.

The mural's design was unveiled this past Saturday by artist Rocky Rische-Baird and Paul Stein, managing partner of SKS Investments, which is restoring the facade of the neo-classical structure, a national historic landmark.

It depicts passengers boarding an iconic Key System orange-colored train at a station. Work on the mural will start next week and is expected to last three months. All the labor will be done by Rische-Baird and his wife, Erica, a noted artist in her own right.

"First, we'll create a cartoon of the design and trace it onto the facade, using techniques that haven't changed since the time of Leonardo da Vinci," he said.

But they won't be using da Vinci's medium.

"He painted 'The Last Supper' with paint made from egg yolks and it started peeling almost from the moment it was dry. We're going to use acrylic, which should last practically forever."

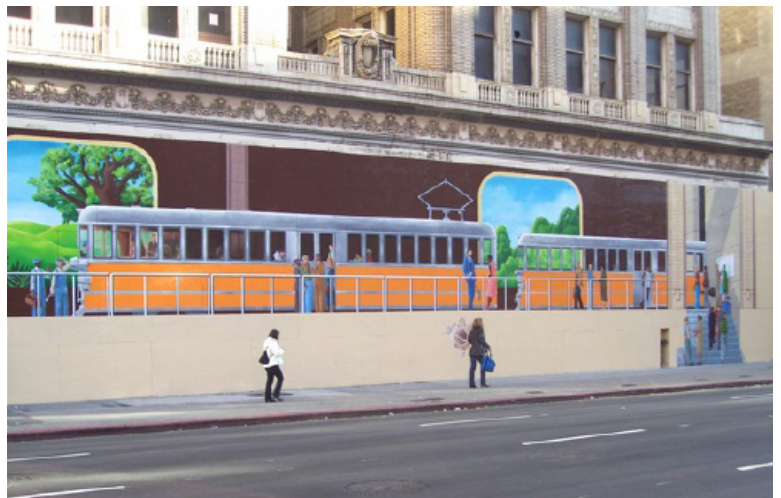
The mural will be painted on heavy plywood fastened to the base of the building. There it will remain for about a year, until SKS Investments begins construction of a modern, 20-story glass tower that will be integrated into the neo-classical design of the existing facade.

"But we're not going to destroy the mural, we're going to preserve it," Stein said. "We'll dismantle it very carefully and put it up for auction, with all the proceeds donated to the Oakland Heritage Alliance."

This is the second mural about the Key System that Rische-Baird has created.

The first, a 12-foot-by-25-foot acrylic on the back wall of the former Piedmont Station -- now J's Hamburgers & Such -- at 41st Street and Piedmont Avenue, was painted in 2005.

"That's how we found him," Stein said. "We wanted something that would honor the Key System, so we Googled 'Key System,' and up popped his mural. We took one look at it and said, 'Bingo! That's our guy!'"



A mural by artist Rocky Baird celebrating the Key Route System, an important Bay Area transit system that operated from the early 20th century until 1960 when AC Transit took over its operations, has now been installed at 1100 Broadway, the site of a new sustainable development by SKS Investments.

Rische-Baird practices what he preaches. He doesn't own a car, despite growing up in Red Bluff, where, he jokes, "public transit consisted of hanging on the back of a truck bumper while riding my skateboard."

But when he moved to Oakland's Temescal neighborhood in 2001, he was moved by the fond stories that old-timers told about the Key System.

"I heard someone say that if a society was truly satisfied with the present, then nostalgia would not exist," he said. "The way people feel about Key System offers a compelling example. If somebody proposed today an electric rail system that would run throughout neighborhoods, everybody would think it's a long overdue act of wisdom."

Chris Peeples, president of the board of directors of the Key System's successor, AC Transit, praised SKS for encouraging people to use mass transit by locating the development right above the downtown Oakland BART station and within a block of 20 AC transit lines.

"It's smart urban planning," he said.

Doug Dove, representing the Oakland Heritage Alliance, lauded the design of the glass tower, which will provide 310,000 feet of office space and 10,000 feet of ground floor retail space.

"I'm really excited about the juxtaposition of the neo-classical and the ultra modern," he said. "This downtown has never really recovered from the Loma Prieta earthquake (in 1989). I'm hoping this development is the first wave of a downtown renaissance."