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## Highly debated: After 40 years, Sutro Tower has become an icon



Pete Kiehart, The Chronicle

*Sutro Tower, with its pinnacle at 1,811 feet, is San Francisco's highest point. This view from the top shows a bit of the tower.*

By [John King](#)

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In the 40 years since Sutro Tower began to transmit television signals on July 4, 1973, one aspect of the enormous structure has not changed - it is a lightning rod that shows how subjective something like architectural judgment can be.

Viewed one way, it's an ungainly metal contraption, an alien presence that mars the wooded slopes nearby on Mount Sutro, San Francisco's third-highest peak. From another perspective, it is an icon as unique to its hometown as Coit Tower or the Golden Gate Bridge.

What's undeniable is that the 977-foot communication tower atop 834-foot-high Mount Sutro is the most visible structure in the city. It is a directional tool, a weather vane, three legs of steel adorned in red and white stripes.

Beyond that, beauty or blight is in the eye of the beholder.

The tower rose shortly after the Transamerica Pyramid, another structure that defied the skyline decorum of

San Francisco. Each shook off opposition on its climb toward the heavens; each remains more futuristic looking than anything here that has come since.

The Pyramid received the most scorn at the time - "hideous nonsense," warned the Washington Post from afar - but the public reaction proved the pre-construction critics wrong. The tapered 853-foot shaft has become a symbol of the city, an architectural stroke known around the world.

Sutro Tower, by contrast, is more likely found on Haight Street T-shirts than postcards at Fisherman's Wharf. It stands outside the mainstream, both in its west-of-Twin Peaks setting and its resemblance to a skeletal robot. Even the bright yet monotonous paint scheme, a federally required touch, adds to the incongruous effect of a thing apart.

What it has in common with the Transamerica Pyramid - with provocative structures of any era - is that it was like nothing that had come before. Not only was the scale disruptive, but erection of the tower required the demolition of a mansion festooned with turrets and stained glass that had been built by a grandson of Adolph Sutro, the 19th century tycoon and mayor of San Francisco. Out with the charming old, in with the shock of the new.

### **'Metallic snout'**

Plans for the tower dated back to 1957, hatched by KGO-TV to overcome the reception problems associated with broadcasting television signals across a hill-studded terrain.

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Neighborhood opposition to a "metallic snout ... in the heart of San Francisco" was trumpeted by The Chronicle, which at the time owned its *own* television station and was seeking to build its *own* mega-tower on San Bruno Mountain. When the Federal Aviation Administration in 1962 rejected the latter summit as too close to San Francisco International Airport, station owners banded together to make Sutro Tower happen.

As construction began in 1971, law students at the University of San Francisco went to court to stop its rise. But the concrete base was already dry, and the three gaunt legs were already above tree level. The tower went up; the lawsuit went down.

Equally futile were protests by such opponents as supervisorial candidate Noah Griffin, who decried the tower at the time as "a big shrine to the mass media."

### **Still a critic**

Later the press secretary for Mayor Frank Jordan, Griffin hasn't softened his views over the years: "I look on it as an eyesore, like a praying mantis."

But to Woody LaBounty, who was an 8-year-old in the Richmond District the day the signals started, what mattered was the change inside his house.

"We got television reception, and I could watch my cartoons," said LaBounty, an author who has written extensively about San Francisco's western neighborhoods.

Sutro Tower is seen from directly below on June 27, 2013 in San Francisco, Calif. Sutro Tower celebrates its 40th anniversary on the Fourth of July this year.

LaBounty reserves his scorn for the broad copper-clad tower of the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum - which rose not in his childhood but in 2006, a dull bar above the trees toward the east end of Golden Gate Park.

"It imposes itself on everything. 'Come worship me. I am the metal god!' " said LaBounty. He paused. "If I had been 25 or 30 when Sutro Tower went up, maybe I'd think the same thing about it instead."

## **Yin and yang**

Neither Griffin nor LaBounty is "right" in terms of Sutro Tower. Nor is there a definitive reason as to why the Transamerica Pyramid went mainstream but its taller counterpart has cult appeal, like an unsigned band or an indie film.

Maybe the sci-fi overtones are too strong. Maybe, as architectural writer Mitchell Schwarzer suggests, the off-limits nature of a tower, closed to the public, on obscure La Avanzada Street, makes it seem unreal.

And maybe, with time, all that is changing.

The word icon has been cheapened by architectural hype. But in some cases it cannot be denied - when a structure becomes shorthand on a skyline, "you are here" and nowhere else. The power of place trumps relative notions of good or bad.

From the day the first switch was flipped on, Sutro Tower has made no pretense of being anything except exactly what it is. In an era when authenticity is all the rage, perhaps that has come to be enough.

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