



Venice labyrinth has some churchgoers balking at circles

By Martha Groves, Los Angeles Times

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With its burned-out lawn and overgrown bushes, the corner lot next to Bethel Tabernacle Church in Venice struck sculptor Robin Murez as ripe for resurrection.

So Murez laid plans to turn the church-owned lot into a pocket park with an in-ground labyrinth, where neighbors could gather to chat, and aging churchgoers could park cars there during suppers and Bible study.

“A labyrinth is a very serene place made for spiritual meditation,” Murez said. “The neighborhood needs some healing. The site looked like a scar.”

After months of plotting and planting, the Oakwood Labyrinth at 6th and San Juan avenues was officially unveiled on Saturday — World Labyrinth Day.

Volunteers worked to build the decorative maze with concrete core samples, each of which was 12 inches tall and 6 inches in diameter and buried flush with the turf. Having personally invested hundreds of unpaid hours and thousands of dollars’ worth of materials, Murez speaks of the project with a mixture of exhaustion and pride.

But the lawyer-turned-artist has learned something about the community she thought she knew so well: Even if one's aim is to improve an area that needs improving, not everyone will be thrilled with the results.

Although passers-by and many neighbors are delighted by the change, the dozen or so elderly churchgoers (oldest member: 94) remain divided on the merits.

"My neighbors told me it was a pagan-type thing," said Carol Powell, a member who lives a few blocks from the church. "My concern is you don't walk in a circle. You come inside the church to worship."

In a neighborhood that has long struggled with gentrification, where million-dollar homes and quirky architectural wonders rise beside peeling bungalows, Murez's offers of help met with some suspicion.

Pastor Harold G. Smith, who said he feels OK about the labyrinth, said some people have had "some problems with understanding its significance. But I need to help them understand that even if you don't necessarily like it, you do need to appreciate people doing good things for you for free."

Murez first broached the labyrinth idea last summer with Sammie Moore, or "Mother Moore," as Bethel's members call her. Moore was cleaning the church one Saturday when Murez cycled by. Murez, who has long maintained a studio and outdoor sculpture garden on Abbot Kinney Boulevard, told Moore about her desire to create public green spaces.

"Robin has a special spirit," Moore said, "and I was drawn to the idea."

Moore and Smith said they have done their best to explain to the congregation the concept of a labyrinth as a path for personal, psychological and spiritual transformation. After all, one of the most famous prayer labyrinths, dating from about 1200, is embedded in the floor at Chartres Cathedral near Paris.

But Smith acknowledged that some church members remain confused. Since the labyrinth's recent completion, he said, feedback has been "nil, zero, zilch." Meanwhile, church member Powell said she was upset to learn recently that dancing would be part of the opening festivities.

The church got more than it expected out of the arrangement. A block away sits the green Craftsman-style house that Venice developer Abbot Kinney bequeathed to his African American chauffeur, Irving Tabor. With that for inspiration, Murez and volunteers painted the beige Craftsman-style church in several complementary shades of green.

Local plumbers, nurseries and stores provided laborers and pitched in with paint, queen palms and an automated sprinkler system.

Alyson Horn, who lives across the street, said the labyrinth "creates a feeling of community and ... actually ends up making the area safer. It changes the energy."

Next door, sculptor Woods Davy initially raised a fuss when landscape architects urged Murez to remove a tree that provided a privacy screen. Murez trimmed it instead, and Davy now says the freshly painted church is "absolutely beautiful."

Martha Groves who covered the Westside for the Los Angeles Times, left the newsroom in 2015. A native Hoosier, she became a Metro reporter after many years as a Business writer and editor. She previously worked for the Philadelphia Inquirer and the late, lamented Chicago Daily News.