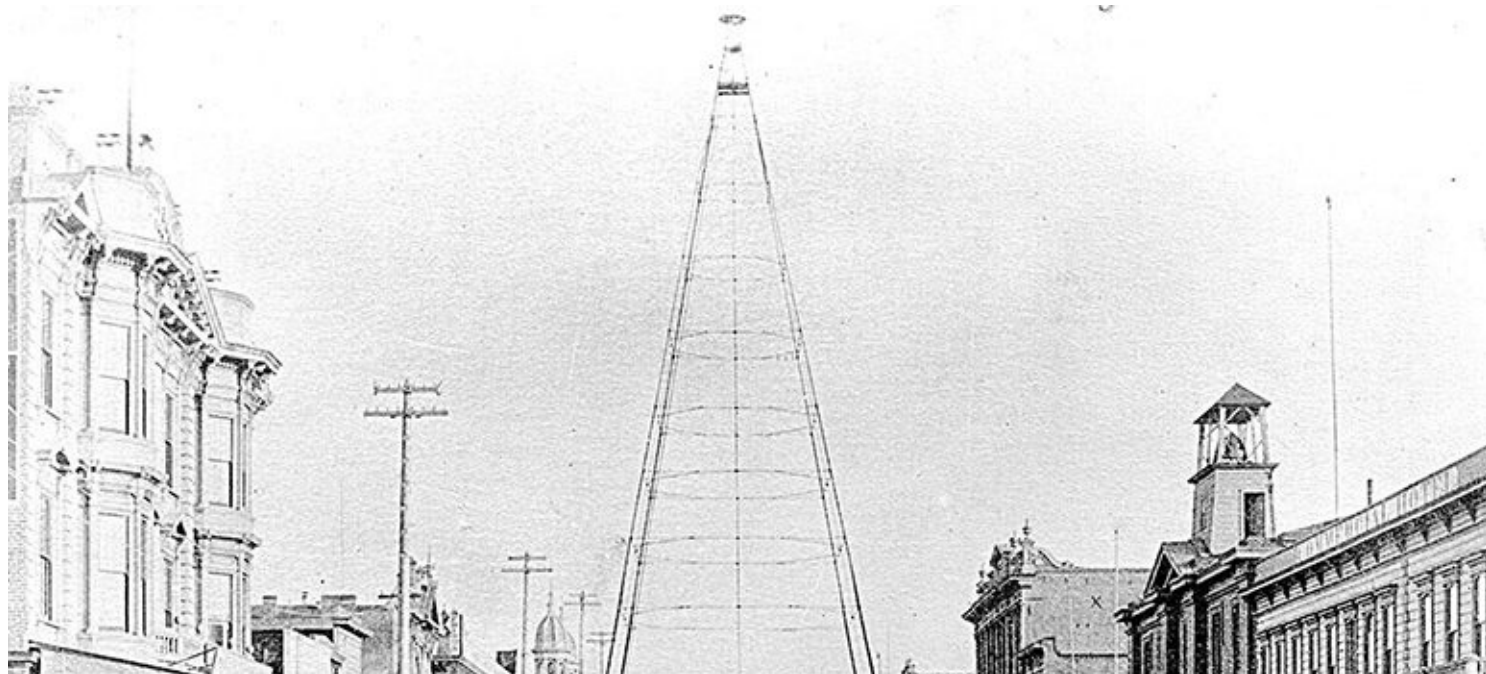


NEWS

International Competition Spurs Ideas for San Jose Landmark

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A contest seeks to reimagine San Jose's old electric light tower landmark. (Photograph courtesy of the Saratoga Historical Foundation)

San Jose has long lived in the immense shadow of its neighbor to the north, San Francisco, which has no less than a half-dozen landmarks that have come to define it.

When it comes to San Jose landmarks—well, let's just say the largest city in the Bay Area and the 10th largest in the nation has a way to go.

In the land of innovation, it seems like an outright contradiction that San Jose is bereft of an icon that marks it as a world-class city.

That narrative could be changing soon.

The [San Jose Light Tower Corporation](https://www.sanjoseinside.com/news/light-tower-proposal-would-give-san-jose-a-true-landmark/) (<https://www.sanjoseinside.com/news/light-tower-proposal-would-give-san-jose-a-true-landmark/>) recently closed submissions for its worldwide open ideas competition, Urban Confluence Silicon Valley.

The goal: to create a global iconic landmark across the street from the SAP Center, on Arena Green at Guadalupe River Park and Gardens.

Along with corporation founding partners Steve Borkenhagen and Thomas Wohlmuth, Jon Ball hopes the newly created landmark brings a world-class experience for locals and tourists alike, rivaling that of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Statue of Liberty in New York and the Gateway Arch in St. Louis.

“That’s why we’re doing it,” Ball explained in a recent interview. “We take the position of if not us, then who? If not now, then when?”

UCSV received 960 submissions from artists, architects, urban planners, engineers, students and anyone with a passion for place-makers spanning 72 countries and six continents to create the landmark using different architectural, tech and design elements. The local Community Competition Panel has evaluated the entries and recommended 47 designs to the jury—a 14-member group comprised of architects, environmentalists, designers and more—who will deliberate on Aug. 3 and 4 to choose three finalists.

Ball was impressed as he looked at the submissions—all 960 of them.

“I’ve taken the time to go through every single submission,” he said. “It’s taken days and many, many hours of looking. My impression is we’re going to have a challenge picking the top 3 as a jury because there are a lot of really good ones.”

UCSV will give each finalist \$150,000 and a chance to refine and re-develop their project plan with a team of artists, engineers and urban planners. Once that is complete, they will select one winner—which is expected to be decided by spring 2021—and their team to transform Arena Green into a world-class destination.

Even though the nonprofit corporation has fundraised over \$1.5 million, Ball expects the final design submission cost could be upwards of \$100 million or more, depending on the complexity and scope of the project. As long as the jury picks a design that resonates with the public, he's confident raising enough money for the project won't be an issue.

"If we get this design right, the money will be there because there is so much wealth in this valley," Ball said. "There are people who would love to put their name on something like this, whether their name goes on it or to be associated as a major donor. There is a lot of philanthropy in this valley, and I think this is a great opportunity for the tech industry to do some community good."

The Light Tower Corporation has gotten a lot of things done since it was formed in early 2017. In December 2016, Ball retired from a highly successful 40-year career managing large, complex construction projects like Mineta San Jose International Airport. However, Ball wasn't ready to ride off in the sunset just yet.

"When I retired, I had a lot of gas left in the tank," he said. "I had a desire to make a difference in the community."

As did Borkenhagen, Thomas and Christine Davis, who is a Urban Confluence board member. The Light Tower Corporation was born with a mission to build an iconic landmark for San Jose and be recognized around the world as a must-see attraction.

The nonprofit is made up of Silicon Valley residents who are passionate about urban place-making and the role that design can play in building a community.

The nonprofit pays homage to the San Jose Electric Light Tower, the city's first and only world-class landmark [it was constructed in 1881 in downtown San Jose before collapsing during a storm in 1915]. It was never replaced, and it took over 100 years before a project has been this deep in the process of establishing another landmark.

The Light Tower Corporation isn't the first organization to take a crack at erecting an iconic landmark for San Jose—it's just deeper in the process than past efforts.

"A couple people have over the years had a vision of doing something similar, but things got derailed for whatever reason," Ball told San Jose Inside. "But we certainly feel now it's our time and it's our job to do."