HARTFORD'S STONE FIELD, SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE

Occupying Hartford since 1977, and targeting the state Capitol, is a permanent symbol of resistance - geological resistance, impervious to wind, rain, cold, hunger and boredom. I refer to the Stone Field Sculpture by Carl Andre, euphoniously located at the corner of Gold and Main.

There they sit: 36 native rock boulders, patiently ignoring the news of the day and the slush of opinion, symbols of stability even more durable than the architecturally wrought stone buildings surrounding them.

But why are the boulders there? To the arts community, they comprise a world-renowned exhibit of minimalist art donated to the city by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. To those of a more conservative mind, it remains a scandalous waste of money and prime real-estate space. Will K. Wilkins, director of Real Art Ways, a nonprofit city arts organization, defends the work as "a contemporary idea that summons the deep time of pre-history and, with its proximity to the Ancient Burying Ground, invites reflection on the presence of our Colonial past, and the inevitability of our own passing."

In the words of former Mayor George Athanson, however, it's "just a bunch of rocks," adding, "little kids could do it."

Wilkins is right. Athanson was wrong.

First, they're not rocks. They're boulders made of rock. Boulder is the object. Rock is the material. If we don't call a common nail "steel," or a Windsor chair "wood," then we shouldn't call a boulder "rock." And technically, each boulder is a stone, generally with a crudely rounded shape, the larger ones having been milled by the shearing action of glacial ice and the smaller ones tumbled by torrents of water.

Second, they're not a bunch. That plural noun connotes a clustered disorder. In contrast, the Stone Field Sculpture is artistically arranged as a geometric array, with parallel rows of stone increasing in size and diminishing in number to the west. Collectively, they define a wedge symbolically pointing toward the state Capitol.

Third, little kids could not do it.

Fourth, the tip of the wedge, reportedly a 10-ton boulder, is the perfect place to reflect on the under-appreciated beauty of Hartford's architectural stone: marble, brownstone, granite, brick, limestone, sandstone, bluestone, slate and all that. That's why I chose that boulder as the rendezvous point for a walking field trip on the urban geology of Hartford, which I'm running this Saturday at noon. This trip, sponsored by Real Art Ways as part of its 35th anniversary celebration, complements one I ran last summer in the rural highlands of eastern Connecticut.

Our Saturday trip will time-travel backward from the 20th century Stone Field Sculpture to the shaping of its boulders 200 centuries earlier, and then to the creation of its rock at least 2 million centuries before that. Then we'll return to Hartford as an American city, looking for stone in buildings such as the Old State House and city hall, and hearing readings from a new book, "Stories in Stone: Travels Through Urban Geology," by David B. Williams.

Our trip will end in the Colonial era, with ruminations on deep time and human mortality evoked by gravestones in Hartford's most ancient cemetery, the Old Burying Ground. The two-hour trip is free...
and open to the public, so please come join us if you're interested and can spare the time (pun intended).

Or perhaps you're more interested in rural scenery and better foliage. If so, there are plenty of alternative walks this weekend in the Last Green Valley, aka the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers National Heritage Corridor. These events are part of "Walktober," a monthlong series of hikes, paddles, tours and other events celebrating rural environment and culture.

But if it's stone you want, Hartford's the place this week and every other week for the foreseeable future and beyond.

The boulders occupying Hartford's sculpture, the stones occupying street buildings and the markers occupying its graveyards all symbolize resistance.