

## A seminal moment for public art group

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The May 16 installation and dedication of the Temple Chess and Poetry Garden is a seminal moment for the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation, which commissioned the work by Siah Armajani, an Iranian-born artist who in the four decades since he emigrated to the United States has earned acclaim for creating sculptures that activate public spaces.

The \$325,000 public art project, 60 percent of it paid for with private contributions, is the first major commission for the foundation, a private nonprofit corporation that replaced a city of Des Moines commission established by former Mayor Preston Daniels in 2000. The city still gives some money from its capital improvements budget to the foundation, and the group received \$25,000 in Bravo Greater Des Moines' inaugural round of cultural grants, but most of the foundation's money comes from philanthropy.

The installation, located on the plaza space between the Temple for Performing Arts and Des Moines Public Library on the Locust Street side of the new Western Gateway Park, will be dedicated at a ribbon-cutting ceremony at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 16. Members of the Chess Club of Iowa will help activate the space by playing matches at each of the three tables designed by Armajani, and musicians from the Des Moines Symphony Academy, housed in the Temple, will provide entertainment.

John W. Firman, a consultant who works with the foundation, said that with limited funding in the organization's infancy, emphasis is placed on the quality of artworks over the actual number of installations. "We're trying to acquire pre-eminent artists," he said. "We would rather do a few things very well rather than a lot of things with mediocrity."

That's why the group wanted to work with Armajani, whose previous works have included the Olympic Torch at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta and public art installations in the New York Staten Island tower and bridge, the Irene Hixson Whitney Bridge in Minneapolis, a round gazebo in Nice, France, and public gardens from coast to coast.

Pamela Bass-Bookey, the foundation's president, said her experience raising the 60 percent private match for the chess table and poetry garden project reinforced her belief in the public's appetite for more aesthetically pleasing surroundings. "This is the easiest fund raising I've ever done," she said. "People are happy to be giving to something that makes a difference in their community and they know people are using."

The chess garden is an outgrowth of a proposal from the family of Bennett Webster, a chess aficionado, to donate a chess table to the city of Des Moines in his memory. The elements in the public art installation includes three chess tables made of rot-resistant ipee wood, which is almost like steel in its durability; a rectangular garden surrounded by an iron fencing embedded with brass-lettered lines of poetry; benches; and a large square table having multiple uses.

The project is just the beginning for the foundation, which Bass-Bookey expects to place special emphasis on Locust Street corridor to the state Capitol. "Plantoir" and "Crusoe Umbrella," two large sculptures by Claes Oldenburg, are already in place at **Meredith Corp.** and Nollen Plaza, respectively, and foundation members see an opportunity to build on that.

Though both "Plantoir" and "Crusoe Umbrella" are static pieces, "what really engages people is when they can look at something and participate in it," Bass-Bookey said.

With the first major commission accomplished, public art enthusiasts have already turned their attention to future projects. The foundation has given \$75,000 to Des Moines native Anna Gaskell for a \$150,000 art installation at the Iowa Events Center to be called "Shining Maze," and is collaborating with District Associate judge Odell McGhee on public art to commemorate the founding of the National Bar Association in Des Moines in 1925 by five black lawyers after African-Americans were denied membership in the American Bar Association. The Science Center of Iowa received a \$200,000 grant to cover half of the cost of a public art installation near the museum's reflecting pool.

The foundation also hopes to promote greater awareness of the value of public art to a world-class city and the different ways it inspires citizen.

"There are a lot of meanings to a lot of different people," Firman said. "It makes a statement about how society views itself, about their attitudes and the way they think about the community and their ability to intelligently engage, whether with an inanimate object or an active environment."

"We see it as a threat, almost, in many ways, that [because it's] public art, people think it will be damaged or someone will get hurt or that it is an obstacle," Bass-Bookey said. "In Europe, people have grown up around great old buildings and public art. It reflects their sensibilities and they wouldn't dream of [destroying it]."

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