

Bridge to the art world is a real piece of work, the bridge builders say

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Fred Riermann has been building bridges in the Twin Cities area for 17 years, but he's never done anything like the \$1.6 million bridge-sculpture whose first span was to be installed today in Minneapolis.

Designed by an internationally known Minnesota sculptor, the pedestrian bridge will span Hennepin and Lyndale Aves., plus the eight lanes of Interstate Hwy. 94 in the tunnel beneath the two streets. The bridge will connect Loring Park and the new Minneapolis Sculpture Garden opposite the Walker Art Center and the Guthrie Theater.

The Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge is a working bridge that meets state and federal highway construction code requirements, but it's also a work of art. That meant that each piece of the 379-foot, 240-ton bridge had to be more finely handcrafted, welded and finished than usual in the bridge trade, which already deals in precision construction.

"This just isn't your average bridge," said Riermann, president of American Structural Metals Inc. of Hugo, Minn., where most of the skyways in St. Paul were fabricated.

"For one thing, the curved arches are unique. We've never done anything like that before. There's a lot of extra things in it, more pieces, more angles, the railing, the trusses.

"Take away the arches and you have just another bridge. But they give it class, and it's the only one of its kind anywhere and so of course I'm proud of it. So are the welders, and the grinders who worked on it. They all liked it."

It has taken three years to translate the artistic vision of Siah Armajani, the sculptor who designed it, into hard steel.

The bridge had to satisfy a complex constituency including the city of Minneapolis and state and federal highway authorities. The proposed width of the ramp was increased from 6 feet to 8 feet to ease handicapped access. A section of the ramp that initially called for steel decking was redesigned when state highway engineers noted that it could turn slippery in winter. Even the position of the handrail and the shades of yellow, blue and green that the span will be painted were subject to official approval.

The first section of the bridge was to be hauled to Minneapolis late Monday, loaded on a flatbed truck trailed by a steering dolly to help handle the extra length and weight.

By Thursday morning all three spans should be in place.

Once the bridge is in place, the wood deck will be installed by the bridge's general contractor, Cy-Con Inc. of St. Paul.

The bridge is expected to be completed by Sept. 10, when the sculpture garden is scheduled to open.

Riermann got the job the way he, or any other bridge builder, gets jobs. "I looked at the specs, saw I could do it, and bid on it," he said.

The bridge's reversed arches, one concave, the other convex, overlap in the center where they are joined by a tall steel gate, a familiar feature in Armajani's work. The family of the late Irene Hixon Whitney, Minneapolis philanthropist, donated \$800,000 for the bridge in her name. The rest of the money for the \$1.6 million bridge came from federal, state and city agencies.

"The bridge symbolizes what Irene's life was all about, what she wanted to be and what she wanted to do," said Wheelock Whitney, her widower and a former Independent-Republican candidate for governor.

Before she died last year, Irene Whitney helped establish programs in drug counseling and youth work. As a drug counselor and youth worker, she often described her life as a bridge between wealthy and poor, criminal and law-abiding, young and old.

Irene Whitney's involvement with community and social service agencies developed following her 1964 treatment for alcoholism. In 1966 she cofounded the Johnson Institute, an alcohol and drug abuse counseling center in Edina. She also helped establish the Omegon drug treatment center in Minnetonka, and two halfway houses for troubled adolescents. The bridge will be a walkway for pedestrians between the park and the \$8.5 million sculpture garden, which was designed by New York architect Edward Larrabee Barnes. Both ends of the bridge will have ramps for the handicapped.

The sculpture garden is a joint project of the Walker and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board.

Armajani, a resident of Minneapolis since he came here as a student in 1959, is considered one of the nation's most influential artists. He is completing a plaza in front of the Humphrey Institute at the **University of Minnesota** and is collaborating with architect Cesar Pelli on a waterfront park in a \$14 million New York City redevelopment project.

His sculptures are often taken from familiar shapes. They often resemble old covered bridges, wood picnic tables, garden gates. These are embellished with quotations from American writers and statesmen.

For the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge, a poem by author and critic John Ashbery will appear in bronze letters along the bridge railings.

Since 1980, Armajani has done several public commissions, including a bridge for the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration in Seattle; a memorial in Philadelphia for architect Louis Kahn; reading gardens in Roanoke, Va., and Purchase, N.Y., an installation for the winter Olympics at Lake Placid, N.Y., and a bandstand in Mitchell, S.D.