

PUBLIC ART COMES TO Life
 in St. Louis Park:
 Allegory of Excelsior

St. Louis Park is the birthplace of comedian Al Franken, three-time Pulitzer Prize-winner Thomas Friedman, and now a major public artwork by Minnesota artist Andrea Myklebust.

It is rare that communities outside metropolitan areas plan for public art. Yet in December 2003, the City of St. Louis Park, a suburb of Minneapolis with 44,000 residents, struck a deal with TOLD Development Co. to include public artwork in a new project at the center of the suburb.

The artwork is part of the Excelsior and Grand/Park Commons East project. The designer is Elness Swenson Graham (ESG Architects, Inc.), with landscape design by Damon Farber Associates. They've created a compact pedestrian-oriented mixed-use development close to the street, with retail space at ground level and residential above. The centerpiece is green space, or a "town green," connecting the major thoroughfare, Excelsior Boulevard, with an existing public park to the north. Ringing the nucleus is a traffic circle.

The city's support of public art was a stroke of luck, according to Bob Cunningham of TOLD Development. "It takes a tremendous amount of time to fold public art into a private development project," he says. "The City of St. Louis Park deserves all the credit for making the project happen."

Honing the focus, choosing the artist

The process for selecting artists began in December 2000 with the hiring of FORECAST Public Artworks. FORECAST formed a committee that included Cunningham, the project's landscape architect, the design architect, the chair of the city's Parks and Recreation Commission, and other community representatives.

The committee chose different sites within the development for artists to address. Opportunities and ideas for potential artwork sites included paving and street bollards, lighting, a trellis, and the traffic circle in the middle of the development. FORECAST recommended hiring artists at the beginning of the design process.

A St. Louis Park City Council study session set the following criteria "for items to represent and be credited as a public art initiative":

1. The specific piece should be more than simply functional and decorative.
2. The artist should be involved in the design.
3. There should be a public review of the artwork.

FORECAST invited more than 300 artists to submit their qualifications. Forty-five did, and four finalists were selected to formally apply for the commission.



The four artists, all Minnesotans, were Andrea Myklebust, a sculptor, designer, and public art specialist; Douglas O. Freeman, a sculptor and fountain designer; Dean Holzman, a set designer, lighting designer, and woodworker; and Foster Willey, Jr., a sculptor, woodcarver, and bronze relief artist.

"Allegory of Excelsior," by Andrea Myklebust. Cast bronze, gold leaf, and steel, 2003. Photos courtesy of the artist.

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Each artist was paid \$3,500 to develop proposals for the sites. Committee members expressed enthusiasm about several of the proposals but favored one from Myklebust, unanimously choosing her for the project in December 2001.

A sculpture clad in bronze and hope

Myklebust began working on designs immediately after September 11, and the terrorist attacks couldn't help but influence her ideas. She wanted to make something hopeful, without political expression, and soon focused on thoughts for a figurative sculpture. She conceived four proposals in a four-block area: designs for sculptural bollards, pavement

inserts, and guardian wolves (a nod to a treasured public space in the city known as “Wolfe Park”). However, it was her idea for a sculpture at the center of the traffic circle that caught the committee’s attention.

The focal point of Myklebust’s design is an eight-foot-tall cast bronze female figure, clothed only in a thin coat of gold leaf. The sculpture’s smooth, curvy body floats in a sea of vertical, tubular stainless steel reeds atop a 27-foot-high steel base. Myklebust gave her figure a stoic, sharp-featured, classical face, eyes gazing downward. A tight cap hugs the woman’s head, bordered by a crown. The sculpture, which features no details at ground level, is best viewed from the second-story residential units in the surrounding buildings.

Myklebust drew a thematic parallel between her sculpture and the name of the nearby thoroughfare—“Excelsior,” from the Latin meaning higher. The figure, she says, “expresses the ideal of striving for excellence, reaching beyond our own expectations, and entering the unknown with a spirit of optimism and change.”

Before the sculpture made its way to the plaza, Myklebust altered her design several times to address concerns from the selection committee and the St. Louis Park City Council. Initially the figure was bald, then hair was added, removed, then changed again. To appease concerns about a ground-level view of the female form, Myklebust added a bronze sunburst to shield parts of the figure from the public’s gaze.

Modifications, Myklebust says, are a normal part of the process. “I am accustomed to making changes for practical concerns,” she says. “But I felt myself dig my heels in at suggestions that she should have clothes.”



Head detail, “Allegory of Excelsior”

Out of the comfort zone, near Excelsior Boulevard

Nancy Nelson, a member of the selection committee and former chair of the city’s Parks and Recreation Commission, said the sculpture “screamed St. Louis Park, not Andrea Myklebust. It is new, a little bold, and makes you step out of the comfort zone.”

In March 2002, the sculpture’s fabrication began. *Allegory of*



“Allegory of Excelsior”

Excelsior was installed and dedicated in 2003.

Public art is a function of good planning, according to TOLD Development’s Cunningham. Without sufficient time, he says, it’s unlikely public art will become standard in private development. And without city support, he adds, this particular sculpture would not have been possible.

This project illustrates the combination of forces that ensures a successful artist selection, placement of the artwork, fabrication, and installation:

- City support and funding for the project
- Enthusiasm and support from the developer
- The artist’s ability to communicate ideas and work with city officials

Still, despite the acclaim for Myklebust’s sculpture, the next three phases of the Excelsior and Grand/Park Commons East development project lack funding for public art. This will likely come only from a more comprehensive plan by city officials to integrate art into the fabric of St. Louis Park. The City Council needs to create policies encouraging the funding of art in public spaces and ongoing incentives for such funding to come from private development.

The result will be an integration of public art that is not only an enhancement but also an extension of a community’s voice, an instigator of dialogue and audience participation, an educational tool, a trigger for memory, and a marker that inspires a city to define itself.

Shelly Willis manages the University of Minnesota’s Public Art on Campus Program at the Weisman Art Museum, including the development of temporary and permanent public art on campus throughout the University of Minnesota system.

Allegory of Excelsior
Excelsior Boulevard and
Grand Way
St. Louis Park

A
 Mayor's dream
 becomes a REALITY

Vadnais Heights
 City Hall

Something extraordinary happened in Vadnais Heights: works of art were integrated into our new city hall, a \$3.3 million facility that opened in March 2001.

The art goes far beyond placing a statue-on-a-stick in a lobby. It involves artists Michaela Mahady's 250-square-foot stained-glass window; Tim Harding's 9-by-6-foot silk representation of the surface of a pond; and Fuller Cowles's and Connie Mayeron's granite mosaic-faced reception desk and planter-seating structure.

Inspired, the community embraced the project. People were invigorated by what happened. Today, they remain proud of what our new civic home and the art woven into it say about who we are.

The public art project started as a dream of mine when we first began talking about building a new city hall. Frankly, I was a bit skittish about how the idea would be received. In fact, during my campaign for another mayoral term, a friend advised me not to talk about public art. "You'll become known as the Art Mayor," he cautioned.



Stained glass by Michaela Mahady

Nonetheless, I forged ahead because I treasure the role art plays in life, and I believe its incorporation into city spaces is important for those who live and work there.

The dream became all of ours

I had nothing to fear. Once the community got involved, the dream became theirs. Ideas flourished, excitement snowballed, and the dimensions of my dream expanded greatly. The initiative took a lot of time and much dedication, and I can point to several reasons for success.

First and foremost, we couldn't have done this without community leadership and involvement. A task force of residents; business, City Council, and staff representatives; and city hall architect David Kroos determined which artists to consider, interviewed them, and recommended artists to the City Council. The task force gave the artists direction and forwarded the concepts to the council. Task force members were outstanding liaisons, working hard to provide information to the community. So professional in how it conducted business, the task force gained the City Council's full trust—no easy feat. I would be remiss in not mentioning the important leadership provided by the City Council, which was involved and interested in every detail. It provided \$35,000 of the project's \$145,000 cost.

A good share of the success owes to the fact that the art reflects community values. The task force developed a list of community values, namely the beauty of our city's lakes, wetlands, and natural habitat. The art mirrors what the community holds dear, engendering a great deal of pride and helping to provide a sense of identity. And homegrown artists were selected; that was important too. The task force made a wise decision when selecting extraordinary artists from the northeast metro area. This really wasn't a difficult task, given the abundance of talent and skill there.

Part of the community's engagement in this whole process is a result of information-sharing efforts to keep residents abreast of developments. Every step of the way, information was communicated through newsletter articles, cable television interviews, and flyers inserted in utility bills. Also, we took our show on the road, appearing with professional displays at pancake breakfasts, school carnivals, and open houses. Organizations and businesses also stepped up to the plate. The city's businesses, service organizations, and residents raised \$110,000 for the project.

And finally, we must thank Public Art St. Paul and its executive director, Christine Podas-Larson, who shepherded this project along every step of the way. Christine's guidance, commitment, and knowledge were instrumental to our success.

Our city hall has brought special attention and recognition to Vadnais Heights. People stop by just to look at the art. Special events are held here because of the art and the building's beauty. Our city hall has been featured in newspapers and in Public Art St. Paul publications. Art exhibitions and shows are staged regularly in our community's home.

Putting an imprint on 'Unweave the Weave'

With the successful completion of our city hall, we moved on to a much bigger project—the integration of public art into the Minnesota Department of Transportation's "Unweave the Weave," a public works project to completely redesign and expand the I-35E/I-694E interchange in Vadnais Heights. This major reconstruction will transform a freeway interchange that now involves six lanes of traffic and about six bridges into 12 lanes of traffic, about 10 bridges and "flyovers," and two to three miles of noise walls.

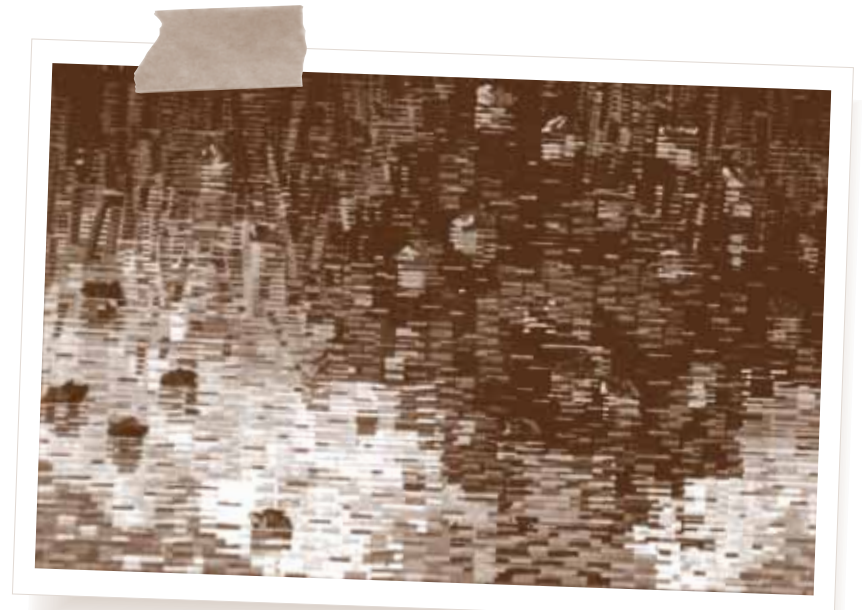
Taking advantage of dollars available from the Minnesota Department of Transportation for local communities to enhance freeway projects, Vadnais Heights contracted with Twin Cities artists Stanton Sears and Andrea Myklebust to design form liners for the bridges' parapets. Once completed, the parapets will feature impressions of environmental highlights of Vadnais Heights, including images of pine cones, oak leaves, and lily pads.

Sears and Myklebust also designed special bridge railings to reflect the Vadnais Heights environment. Depending on the eye of the beholder, the railings will resemble grasses blowing in the wind, waves, or other images of nature. What's more, sections of the noise wall that will ring large parts of Vadnais Heights will be softened with a pine tree motif and geese sculptures.

Inspired, the community embraced the project. People were invigorated by what happened. Today, they remain proud of what our new civic home and the art woven into it say about who we are.

As in the city hall art project, a task force was involved with architects and engineers to give it a true Vadnais Heights imprint and to soften the look of concrete and metal. Thanks to so many, our city hall public and freeway art projects truly reflect the community that thousands of people are proud to call home.

By the way, it would be an honor to be known as the Art Mayor.



"Wetlands Reflections," by TIM Harding, silk wall hanging
photo courtesy of the City of Vadnais Heights

Susan Banovetz has been in elected office for more than 20 years, the last eight as mayor of Vadnais Heights. She is also director of media and public relations for the University of Minnesota's College of Liberal Arts and serves on Public Art St. Paul's board of directors.



Vadnais Heights City Hall
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