

Artist's work bridges gaps World-famous creator of Beloit Fishing Bridge says public art creates dialogue: [Final Edition]

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An artist known for his work at the 1996 Summer Olympics is turning an abandoned railroad bridge across the Rock River into a statement about this city's industrial heritage.

Siah Armajani's 750-foot Beloit Fishing Bridge is the final key piece to a riverfront development project on the city's north side. The project should be complete by early October.

Armajani, of St. Paul, Minn., granted a rare interview Friday while at **Beloit College** for the opening of his exhibit there, "The Poetry of Public Art."

"I'm very pleased," said a beaming Armajani when asked about his new bridge. "People must use it and enjoy it."

Armajani gained international renown for his design of the cauldron that held the Olympic flame during the 1996 Games in Atlanta. His work is also displayed in National Airport, in Washington, D.C., and his tribute to anarchist Emma Goldman is a fixture on the **Beloit College** campus.

The focal point of Armajani's Fishing Bridge is a 7,000-pound locomotive that was installed on an elevated platform atop the structure Thursday.

While his work has made him famous, Armajani shuns publicity because he wants people to remember and think about his art rather than him. "It is not me, it is the art. I want people to use it. This art brings people together. It mediates between them and the environment," he said.

He talks to communities before creating his public art, and although there is much talk of how selfish people are, he said, people talk about what the community needs.

"They talk about wanting safety, wanting handicap accessibility, about not destroying the environment. That is what public art is about giving the public what they want," he said.

His attitude toward art is influenced by his degree in philosophy as well as the ideals behind the democratic process. One of his works in progress is a garden sculpture in France.

"There are constraints there," he said. "In France, anything older than 10 years is historic not like here, where if it's 10 years old and we don't like it, we raze it and start again. There, I designed garbage cans and everything to fit around a museum that is already there."

The Fishing Bridge features several picnic tables, including a large one with five sections for adults and one for children. "The table truly brings us together," he said. "We are together, but we are apart in our own space."

He said he welcomes the fact that public art is working to revitalize cities. "Cities are the heart of our society. This is where we come from. Minneapolis is being revitalized, as is Beloit. We should nurture our cities and bring the public together with art," he said. He is intrigued by a suggestion that perhaps a city should commission him to make their municipality more "public friendly." He sits for a while, then pounces on the idea. "I'd like that," he says with much animation. "Now, these so-called open or green spaces are political. They would be much more friendly if we could take the politics out."

And when he is gone, what does he want people to say about him and his art? "Nothing," he says with a smile. "In Saudi Arabia they have the right idea. When you die, you are buried and nothing marks the spot. It is not about me. It is about making people happy that is what art is supposed to do, make people happy and bring them together."