

More than the rooster is new at the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden

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AARON LAVINSKY – STAR TRIBUNE

Yes, the revamped Minneapolis Sculpture Garden will be home to a giant blue rooster. That chicken sure knows how to peacock.

But the partners behind the park hope it will become much more: A modern sculpture garden that — with 60 works, 18 of them new — highlights a new, diverse generation of artists. A national model for an urban garden that embraces the city around it. A welcoming front door to the Walker Art Center, to a vibrant theater and art district, to Minneapolis itself.

The garden's June 3 reopening marks a major moment for the city, which is gussying itself up to host the Super Bowl next year.

The \$10 million makeover also caps a yearslong transformation of the Walker's campus led by Olga Viso, the art center's executive director.

"There was a real urging to open the garden up," Viso said, walking through the garden in a hard hat on a recent afternoon. She pointed out new entrances, buried power lines, hedges of forsythia where tall evergreens once stood. "The sculptures are the stars now."

One of the garden's newest sculptures is already causing controversy: American Indian activists are raising concerns about Sam Durant's "Scaffold," a large wood-and-metal structure based in part on the gallows used to execute 38 Dakota men in Mankato in 1862.



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But the stately, ultramarine rooster, “Hahn/Cock,” by Katharina Fritsch, could prove to be the superstar. Its eye-popping color and massive scale — reaching 23 feet tall — anchor a bigger, bolder wing of the garden. The blue bird also sets off the red of the garden’s iconic “Spoonbridge and Cherry,” continuing the garden’s outsized tradition.

Since its opening in 1988, the garden has inspired other cities and art centers around the country. Seattle and Chicago sent delegations to study the partnership between the Walker, which owns the sculptures, and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, which owns the land.

“It was definitely a pioneering sculpture park,” said Glenn Harper, editor-in-chief of *Sculpture* magazine, “in terms of the partnership, the urban location and the high standard of the work.”

And now the partners hope to again be in the vanguard.

Art centers and cities today are focused less on “art that’s enclosed in a cultivated garden space and more on art that’s out and creates a kind of bridge to an urban environment,” said John Beardsley, director of garden and landscape studies at the Dumbarton Oaks research institute in Washington, D.C.

A cherry, a chicken

In a basement room within the Walker Art Center’s archives, an 8-foot-long model of the Sculpture Garden was spread across two tables. A tiny, built-to-scale version of “Spoonbridge and Cherry” sat in the center. Around it, miniature paper maquettes of sculptures, old and new.

A petite black cylinder represented Chicago artist Theaster Gates’ 20-foot-tall brick version being installed, at that moment, outside. Small-scale look-alikes of two figures within Mark Manders’ “September Room,” a new piece the Walker commissioned. And yes, a tiny ultramarine rooster, his profile cocked slightly to the side.

“Your impulse is to make it parallel to the sidewalk, the road,” Viso said, turning the miniature version of “Hahn/Cock” a half inch. “But my gut was actually no, and that it needed to turn.”

Over the past few months, real-life versions of those sculptures have been popping up in the Sculpture Garden and on the hillside along the Walker.

This project, the final piece of the Walker's \$41 million campus redesign, was meant to connect the gardens on either side of Vineland Place, drawing people from the popular Sculpture Garden to the Walker's new entrance and into its galleries. While the Walker does not own the land beneath the sculptures, "people experience this as a continuous space," Viso said. "It was like a Rubik's Cube of design problems to try to solve together."

That meant myriad meetings with lawmakers, neighbors, project managers. Donors, architects, artists. It meant drawing on the decades-long partnership with the Park Board.

Together, after several tries, the two institutions nabbed \$8.5 million in state money in 2014 to rebuild the garden's infrastructure and \$1.5 million from the Mississippi Watershed District to create an 80,000-gallon cistern that stores stormwater to irrigate the garden and part of the adjacent baseball field. (One bonus: using untreated water in the "Spoonbridge and Cherry" fountain might mean fewer touch-ups to the iconic red.)

Both institutions weighed hundreds of decisions along the way, said Dana Murdoch, design project manager for the Park Board.

They considered how the sculptures look not only from within the park but Hennepin and Dunwoody avenues.

"We thought about being able to experience the garden as you're biking by, as you're driving by," Murdoch said. They built better entrances on the west and north sides, placed sculptures at those ends to draw people in.

Viso considered the rooster's profile from the revamped parking lot, the garden and the street. After she and the curators exhausted the limits of two-dimensional maps, staffers created the basement model. When even that wasn't enough, Viso turned to heavy machinery.

"How tall is that piece of equipment?" she recalled asking a construction manager on site. About 25 feet, he replied.

"That's as big as the bird," Viso said. She laughed, remembering how they moved the machine's "beak" this way and that. "We determined the angle without [the artist] coming here through the beauty of the excavator."

No longer an ‘oasis’

When the Sculpture Garden opened in 1988, the celebration featured synth music, cherry sundaes and make-your-sculpture events. The Park Board rolled out yards of sod hours before the ribbon-cutting. A critic heralded the space, then 7.8 acres big, as “a pristine oasis, fresh and exotic.”

The sculpture park that will be revealed June 3 — which has grown to 12 acres, plus 5 more on the Walker’s hillside site — is less oasis and more open. Less sod and more wetland.

Four acres on the garden’s north end feature a meadow of native plants where surface water will ebb and flow, an acknowledgment of bog-like conditions that sunk an armory that once stood there. “We’re working with it, as opposed to against it,” said Tom Oslund, the landscape architect who redesigned the garden.

Oslund also looked to old photographs to decipher the intentions of Edward Larrabee Barnes, the garden’s original designer. The arborvitae were meant to be kept to a lower height, dividing the garden into galleries but not overpowering the art, Oslund said. Instead, the trees grew, reaching 15 feet before “they decided to start pruning the bottoms of them,” he said. “So they started to look like a French poodle.”

The garden will feel different without the thick lines of trees shielding it from the city, Oslund acknowledged. But that’s by design. A new entrance on the garden’s north end will welcome visitors and, on the west side, a new building will greet buses with accessible bathrooms. Soon, the bridge to Loring Park, designed by Minnesotan Siah Armajani, will be lit. Then there are plans to revamp the I-94 underpass.

The June 3 celebration will mark a feat years in the making, said Jim Dayton, a member of the Walker’s board. Plants and sculptures will connect the campus, Vineland Place’s width will be shrunk in half at the crosswalk.

A decade ago, it was clear the sculpture garden needed fixing up, said Dayton, head of James Dayton Design, a Minneapolis-based architectural firm. Its trees were overgrown, its granite pavers were off kilter: “It was time for something.” But together, the Walker and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board accomplished much more, he said: a unified campus that leads to the city. “It really has, over 25 or 30 years now, become the public face of the Walker,” said Dayton. “And then the Walker therefore, in a way, becomes the front door to the city.”

“As an architect and civic-minded person, I love the way that it works.”