

Trees next in Barre's sculptured landscape

By David Delcore, *The Times Argus*, Nov. 3, 2015

BARRE — What do you call a grove of fir trees carved out of Barre granite?

How about “evergrays”? That’s probably the best way to describe the latest in a growing line of coming attractions in a city that has thoroughly embraced the concept of public sculpture.

Credit Downstreet Housing and Community Development for hopping on the public sculpture bandwagon and commissioning the mini “forest” of contoured granite trees that will be the focal point of a small park planned at the corner of Summer Street and Keith Avenue.

That’s where the four-story building that will house Downstreet’s new offices, as well as 27 units of affordable housing, is under construction. It’s also where a pocket park with some sculptural component has always been part of the mix, according to Executive Director Eileen Peltier.

“We intentionally planned for our new building to be an integral part of the neighborhood, and that’s why we added a small park with space for sculpture to our plans,” said Peltier, who reached out to Sue Higby, executive director of Studio Place Arts, earlier this year and asked her to manage the recently concluded competitive proposal process.

“We were eager to become part of the Stone Sculpture Legacy Program and to tie together our new space with the artistic streetscape of Barre,” Peltier said, referring to the program that Higby proposed and independently managed, and which is fueled with a tiny portion of the bequest six years ago by Barre benefactor Charlie Semprebon.

The program has been wildly successful, according to Higby, who said the best evidence may be that organizations from Downstreet to the Aldrich Public Library are celebrating Barre’s artistic and industrial heritage by investing in sculpture.

“From my perspective that’s thrilling,” said Higby, who happily agreed to put out a call for proposals from sculptors interested in and able to turn around a piece that could be ready for installation by next summer.

Nearly 10 sculptors submitted proposals that went before a jury that included Higby, Peltier and the architect who designed the Downstreet project.

The winner was the abstract woodland setting proposed by George Kurjanowicz, who plans to carve a grove of stylized fir trees out of slabs of Barre Gray granite.

The three stone trees will range in height from 6 to 8 feet and feature draping and curved branches. They will be fitted together with two granite seats nestled in their midst.

According to Higby, the contemporary design elements of the sculpture complement the current lines of the new building, while the tree-formed sculptures will provide a tranquil setting on the fringe of downtown.

Kurjanowicz said he was aiming to produce a sculpture that was “dynamic, whimsical and fun” and settled on a grove of stone trees that would impart a sense of the rich, textured forms of conifers.

“My inspiration came from the pieces setting into each other like a jigsaw puzzle,” he said.

The Kurjanowicz sculpture is one of several scheduled to be completed next year, though the other four were all funded with some of the Semprebon bequest, an avid cyclist who also left Barre and Barre Town \$500,000 each to complete a bike path connecting the two communities.

One of the pieces in the works depicts a cyclist in motion and is considered a nod to Semprebon. The piece, titled “Veloce” — Italian for “fast” — is being carved by Giuliano Cecchinelli II, who also carved the toppled jack-in-the-box bike rack that was recently installed on the Elm Street side of the local library.

Cecchinelli’s father, who was separately commissioned to complete the likeness of Sir Isaac Barre now located in the corridor of City Hall, is responsible for the statue of Charles Dickens’ “Mr. Pickwick” that was recently installed on the front lawn of the library.

A group of library boosters, most with ties to the local granite industry, financed the acquisition and installation of “Mr. Pickwick,” which had been on the elder Cecchinelli’s front lawn for several years.

No one is happier about the infusion of public art than Higby, who views it as “cultural capital” in a small city that has a diverse and still-expanding collection of contemporary public sculpture.

“It is wonderful to be in such a strategic position to know that as improvements are made throughout the city we are able to step forward with a piece of public art owned by the city,” she said, noting that while two sculptural bike racks — the younger Cecchinelli’s jack-in-the-box and Calais sculptor Chris Miller’s gargoyles — are now on display, two more are on the way.

One, a much-larger-than-life fish, is being carved by Gampo Wickenheiser. The other, which depicts a child riding a Big Wheel jumping from one granite ramp to another, will be placed at Charlie’s Playground 2012 and is the work of Heather Ritchie.

Higby said both are scheduled to be finished next year, though no location has been chosen for Wickenheiser's piece.

The same is technically true of "Veloce," though Higby has an idea where it might go. The last piece commissioned with Semprebon funds, "Culmination," is also scheduled to be finished next year by sculptor Sean Williams.

The first installment in what evolved into the Stone Sculpture Legacy Program is positioned in front of Barre City Place. Titled "Coffee Break," the sculpture by Ritchie features four rough-cut, yet-to-be-sawed blocks of Barre Gray granite with life-sized tools of the trade, a coffee cup and a lunch pail carved on the top.

Nearby is a 70-foot-long granite "zipper" garden between Studio Place Arts and Barre City Place and a granite chair that is an on-loan remnant of the sculpture garden that was once on the otherwise vacant lot where that four-story structure was built.

Higby said that together, the pieces have helped build a critical mass of sculpture that is still growing.