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Gerald Ensley: Let Gaines' big blue marvel open your eyes

BY GERALD ENSLEY • DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER • NOVEMBER 22, 2008

"I've heard comments like, 'Wow, that really says we have art,'" said Peggy Brady, executive director of Tallahassee's Council on Culture and Arts. "And even though that park was meant to be traditional, (the sculpture) really fits. It's a nice complement to the park."

If you drive Gaines Street, you've seen the art: "Quark," an 80-foot-tall, blue-painted steel piece by John Henry, a nationally renowned sculptor. It sits in Doug Burnette Park, a one-time children's playground being renovated.

The sculpture went up in late October, with Henry directing assembly. It will be on display until May.

Tallahassee is one of seven Florida cities in which Henry has erected his large steel sculptures. It's called "Drawing in Space: The Peninsula Project," and each sculpture is accompanied by a pair of museum exhibits (at the Mary Brogan Museum and R.A. Gray Building).

All the sculptures were constructed by Henry in his Chattanooga studio, where he employs 23 people. Most of the sculptures, including "Quark," have never been displayed before. Henry, a one-time Florida resident, has lent them all to Florida free of charge.

"Quark," an ironic play on the name of one of the smallest particles in the universe, is hard to describe. One pundit suggested it looks like an arrangement of giant children's pickup sticks. But it's visually arresting.

"I don't know that I expect people to come away with anything, except I hope their eyes are opened a bit and I've contributed to their visual vocabulary," Henry said. "I think sculpture makes people think. If it's big enough to stop people in their tracks, they have to think."

Many may stop to think about the past of Doug Burnette Park.

It occupies a narrow strip between Gaines and Madison streets. Across Gaines is a similar strip of park, also being renovated.

The park was built in 1938 by the Depression-era Works Progress Administration. It was named for the chairman of Tallahassee's first recreation board, who died in 1936.

The park was a neighborhood playground from the 1930s to 1960s, when Gaines and surrounding streets were filled with homes. It had a softball diamond, a basketball court, swings, see-saws and a tetherball pole.

But by the 1970s, most of the families had been chased away by urban re-development. In the 1980s, the playground equipment was removed. The park has sat deserted since.

But spurred by a 2002 reunion of former "Doug Bumette children," the city decided to renovate it. Though it took some time to rise to the top of the city projects list, renovation began in August.

The park has been re-grassed and landscaped with flowering plants and an ornamental fence. Picnic tables, benches and a water fountain have been installed. A concrete pad and sidewalk were added. A brick entrance plaza is under construction on Madison Street.

The park should be open next month. In January, the city will start a similar renovation on the companion park across Gaines. The total project costs \$250,000.

The city equipped Doug Bumette with water and electric power. The concrete pad on which "Quark" sits can be used for a stage, a fountain — or even another sculpture. The idea is to provide not only green space for surrounding office workers but also a venue for music, arts or community gatherings.

"We've covered all our bases, so what we have is absolutely useful to the community," said Dan Farrar, city superintendent of parks. "It will give us another place for the community to gather, and that's what Tallahassee is all about."

The renovation also lays some groundwork for the planned renovation of Gaines into a pedestrian-friendly second downtown.

"People (can now) say something is happening on Gaines Street," Brady said. "It has sent that message."

And while the softball field is gone, history hasn't been erased. The renovation retains the 70-year-old entrance gate to Doug Bumette, with the park name written in wrought iron over two brick columns. The park remains bordered by six giant oaks on one side and a stone wall on the other.

"Its use before reflected the neighborhood around it, and this does too," Brady said. "I think they've preserved the historic nature of Doug Bumette Park."

