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New courthouse's tree art 'to keep getting better'

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Posted Dec 16, 2010 @ 07:54 PM

Last update Dec 17, 2010 @ 08:47 PM

ROCKFORD — The lawn to the east of the new federal courthouse was transformed into a piece of living art just weeks before a blanket of snow covered the city.

Installation of the building's federal Art in Architecture project — the planting of 104 flowering crab apple trees in an interlocking diamond grid pattern — came about six months early.

This means when local, state and federal officials attend the ceremonial dedication and official opening of the \$100 million building in the spring, the 2-acre urban orchard may be blooming for the first time.

The building is 90 percent complete.

While it may be a bunch of trees to some people, it's art to others — including the federal government, which commissioned New York artist Tony Feher to design the orchard as the building's signature Art in Architecture project.

The nation's Art in Architecture program, developed under the Kennedy administration, requires all major new federal construction and remodeling projects to set aside 0.5 percent of the project's total construction cost — or \$250,000 in Rockford's case — for public art.

In most cases, the art becomes something hanging on a wall inside or featured in the atrium or lobby. Rockford's federal courthouse orchard is one of only a handful of art pieces in the program that involve landscaping and the only one in the Midwest.

“There is no other project like this in our program,” said Michael Finn, a fine arts specialist with the U.S. Government Services Administration, which is managing the building's construction. “Everyone is very happy to see it in ahead of schedule. It's going to be a beautiful piece.”

The city's current courthouse was purchased by the GSA in 1998, and therefore does not have an Art in Architecture project — making the orchard the first investment of its kind in the Rock River Valley.

Wait, it gets better

Five varieties of flowering trees of different shapes and sized were planted from Oct. 7 through the end of November.

The design, Feher explained, is meant to be appreciated from multiple vantage points — driving by, looking down from the upper floors of the courthouse and within. Two gravel pathways will weave through the orchard. Benches already have been installed.

And because it's living art, its appearance will change with the seasons. The trees will bloom white and pink flowers in the spring and bear red berries in the fall.

"It's going to be beautiful next spring, but in five years — forget about it," Feher said. "It's just going to keep getting better and better and better."

The gravel pathways are inspired by gardens in Paris where crushed granite is used as opposed to brick or sidewalk.

"When you walk over it, it will have a nice little crunch and feel," Feher said. "It's a really nice texture under your foot as opposed to a hard surface. Plus it helps make that transition from out there to in here."

Only a small portion of the design has been changed. A small island of trees marking the front entrance of the building has been removed for design and security reasons.

Linda Cooper, who manages the nearby William Charles loft-apartment building, said the orchard sounds like just the kind of thing that the building's tenants will enjoy.

"We definitely attract people who like that urban lifestyle," Cooper said. "They like to walk to places like restaurants and shows, and as they walk, they'd like to be able to see things like beautiful buildings and gardens."

Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau CEO John Groh said the additional green space downtown won't go unappreciated.

"It's a very grand and impressive building with a very appropriate footprint," Groh said. "I could see it becoming an oasis-type spot in downtown, a place where people will be able to walk by and walk through."

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