

# Downtown Columbia celebrates Chrysalis groundbreaking in Symphony Woods



Chrysalis groundbreaking in Merriweather Park at Symphony Woods

Phil Grout / For The Baltimore Sun Media Group

An illustration of the outdoor, shell-like amphitheater built of lightweight metal called the Chrysalis that will be unveiled on Saturday in Merriweather Park at Symphony Woods.

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Shovels stand ready for the Chrysalis groundbreaking in Merriweather Park at Symphony Woods.

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Over 150 people gathered at Merriweather Park at Symphony Woods Saturday morning for the groundbreaking of the Chrysalis amphitheater in Downtown Columbia.

As the first of the seven-phase development plan by the Inner Arbor Trust, the shell-shaped outdoor amphitheater will sit east of the Merriweather Post Pavilion, alongside several other planned attractions across the 16.5 acres. The project is funded by a county grant of approximately \$6.4 million over three fiscal years with entire development plan costing approximately \$30 million over the next seven years.

Inner Arbor Trust President and CEO Michael McCall said the 5,000 square-foot building will not be your average band shell. Made from aluminum and structural steel, the Chrysalis acts as a stage, pavilion and sculpture under one structure, with the capacity to hold 400 people.

"It is two stages with the Alpha Stage proscenium for larger productions and the Beta Stage proscenium, with a thrust stage, for smaller events," McCall said. "They share the same stage surface, but one faces one direction and one faces another. It's actually the size of the current Merriweather Post Pavilion stage."

Designed by architect Marc Fornes, McCall said the Chrysalis will "feel as if it's a living part of the environment," blending into the forest with its green skin that gradually changes to blue as it reaches toward the sky.

"Most of the time, there are no performances," he said. "Most of the time, there's not a picnic or book signing. Most of the time, it's a structure in the forest and we wanted to make sure that it's a beautiful sculptural structure."

Oakland Mills Middle School gifted & talented resource teacher Michael Hobson said his students shared their virtual vision of the completed park project with the crowd, using the popular video game, Minecraft. Based on the design plans provided by McCall, students in Hobson's computer modeling class built the structures with cubic meter blocks taken from the three-dimensional environment and recombined into different forms.

"The greatest thing about Minecraft is it's described as a sandbox game with a sense that there's no real goals," Hobson said. "The player brings their own goals into the game. Everybody tends to do Minecraft in a different and unique way. It's an arena for creativity and imagination."

When his students heard about the Chrysalis and other projects at Symphony Woods, Hobson said they immediately asked to build the project in Minecraft to give people a look at the final product. The biggest challenge during the students' endeavor was creating a "hilly" terrain in the video game's flat surface. After sampling elevation patterns in Google Earth, students built up land in Minecraft to create the Symphony Woods atmosphere.

"Then, they mapped out all the paths and places for the structures on top of that Minecraft terrain and they started building from the designs," Hobson said. "The immediacy of the project and the beautiful vision in the designs really caught their attention. These students were coming after school sometimes three afternoons a week for an hour and a half to build because they just caught a passion for what's happening over there at the park."

The Oakland Mills Middle School teacher said he can't wait until the his students' virtual reality becomes a physical one he can share with his family.

"I think it's fantastic that they're looking at a way to keep the woods wooded but also use the space as an attraction to bring people into the city," he said.

Columbia Festival of the Arts Executive Director Todd Olsen said the Chrysalis' "high form" will add a unique quality to the park as well as home for future festivals and artists.

"For 29 years, we've sort of been homeless, which is to say we bounce around all over Howard County," Olsen said. "We curate to all different kinds of experiences and venues all over Howard County. I wouldn't be surprised if the Chrysalis and the subsequent venues in Symphony Woods become an area cultural epicenter for all of Howard County arts organizations."

While churches and schools often charge a significant fee for rehearsal space, Olsen said, the amphitheater will provide a free, open space for musicians, artists, and performers to express themselves. Its size and structure will also allow different functions for any size crowd.

"It can be used as a large stage, playing to potentially thousands of people, to a smaller stage off to one side to play to a more intimate audience," Olsen said. "'I think it can only be good. I think it's unforgettable when you see it. I'm really interested to see how it functions because it aspires to be several different kinds of venues."

Following the rigorous process of permit applications and planning, Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman said he is pleased the Chrysalis is finally moving away from just talk to construction.

"There's been an awful lot of talk for a long time of what's going to happen there," Kittleman said. "Having something built will be something that people will say, 'OK, now we know what's happening.'"

Kittleman said he hopes to see the project completed by the end of 2016 so the outdoor venue can begin its venture for future family entertainment

"It will be another thing to bring people to Columbia and bring people downtown and help with our restaurants and other retail facilities," he said. "I think it will just be an economic enhancement as well as a cultural one. It's a win-win."

McCall said he expects the construction of the Chrysalis will be completed by Summer 2016.

"You can just go here, eat lunch, sit down and relax or have a picnic with your family," McCall said. "People have come to us and asked, 'Hey, can we get married there once it's built,' and I'm sure that will happen. I said to myself that if we play this right, the park will be a field trip for three different trips to the park during someone's school experience, too."

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