



The Greening of Des Moines

B y E l i o t N u s b a u m

Mary Miss came to Des Moines, IA, to reclaim a lagoon that was choking on algae and silt. Her mission was to save a place from itself and create a new public place, *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*, in the process. Within memory a hub of recreational activity, Greenwood Pond was dying from within; she was proposing to give it new life.

Miss was one of several internationally known environmental artists who came to Des Moines in the late 1980s, invited by Julia Brown Turrell, then director of the Des Moines Art Center, to consider creating a site-specific sculpture in Greenwood Park, the small city park that surrounds the museum, two miles from downtown.

"I came to look at sites, but the pond was the most interesting to me," said Miss. "Water is so fascinating, so ephemeral. I photographed the area, which at the time was a derelict site, and began to think about how you could do something without being overwhelmed by the crummy site."

Her idea, albeit a loose one at that point, was to build on the natural setting and materials already there.

Mary Miss, Greenwood Pond: Double Site, various views, August 1996.
(photos: PAR this page and right. Far right photo courtesy Des Moines Art Center)

fact, Iowa's capital city has gone to considerable lengths to insulate itself from its sometimes hostile environment with an elaborate system of skywalks that make it possible to walk through most of downtown without ever stepping outside.) The Des Moines Art Center's neighbors were likewise uncomfortable with the idea of an outdoor sculpture park. The idea of environmental sculpture being placed in Greenwood Park so riled the neighbors that they organized themselves as "The Friends of Greenwood Park" and hired a lawyer to find a way to stop the city from forging an agreement with the museum.

On the surface, the group claimed to be debating the city's right to allow the museum to use public land. But you didn't have to scratch too far to uncover a deep distrust of the museum. What the neighbors really were opposed to was "modern" sculpture, site-specific or otherwise (one neighbor predicted "crashed airplanes in the woods"), chosen by the museum director and placed in their neighborhood park. In reality "their" park had long since fallen into disrepair through neglect and very limited use by all but area teenagers.

As it turned out, unbeknownst to the artist or the museum, the sorry state of the park had attracted concern from other community organizations. "We didn't know there was a Mary Miss or that the area was part of the Des Moines Art Center's sculpture garden," said Lynda Chase-Tone, president of a local gardening club. "We just knew something had to be done with the lagoon. We knew the city was going to dredge it, so we went to the parks and recreation department, asked them if they thought it was possible to turn the lagoon into a wetlands area and if they would draw a design that we could take to the Natural Heritage Foundation and the Science Center to see if this could be made into a reality."

When plans for Miss' project became known, these disparate groups found a focus for their efforts. The result was a unique collaboration between the artist, the Art Center, the Science Center of Iowa (which sits at the opposite end of the park from the Art Center), the Des Moines Founders Garden Club, the Des Moines Parks and Recreation Department, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, and the Polk County Conservation Board.

Together they forged the idea of Iowa's first inter-urban wetlands. The project would combine built elements like ramps,



bridges, walkways, a tower and a pavilion designed by Miss with materials planted by the Founders Garden Club and maintained by the city, and with educational programs run by the Science Center. The project and its coalition attracted public support and financial support from a variety of non-traditional sources, ranging from the Andy Warhol Foundation to the Garden Club of America.

Once the neighbors' lawsuits were successfully fended off, plans for the park went forward. Ground was broken in 1995, and despite problems with weather and an overzealous city mowing crew, *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* is set to officially open in October.

And people are already exploring the site, even before its official inauguration. In fact, the lagoon was crawling with explorers—young and old—this summer. Once construction crews showed up, the teenagers disappeared. In their place came families and various other groups who have taken—or, more accurately, retaken—over the park.

As in many of her other public outdoor projects, Miss has used the most basic of materials—treated lumber, metal mesh, steel, stone, and concrete—all easily repaired or replaced. Likewise,

her designs are simple but inspired by indigenous architecture. Miss traveled around the state, looking at farm buildings, especially circular barns, buildings on the Mesquakie Indian Settlement in Tama, and the Indian burial mounds in northeast Iowa. The built elements are arranged in a sort of circuit, allowing visitors to walk around and over the lagoon, giving them a chance to experience the site on a variety of levels. To Miss, this is the ultimate goal of the project: "The question becomes how can you reveal this place, the experience of it? How many ways can you see this place? The circuit offers a variety of ways of seeing, and by the end, people will walk away feeling they have really seen something."

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