



Labyrinth-shaped pollinator garden coming to Silo City



Photos by Joseph Cooke/Buffalo News

The path of the "River Hill" labyrinth is displayed in Silo City in Buffalo. The nectar- and pollen-rich flowers being planted will be native seeds, planned by artist Dara Friedman, top.

'It will smell great, look beautiful,' designer says

BY MARK SOMMER
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

A meandering labyrinth now taking shape where there was post-industrial slag should be a bustling pollinator garden in the spring, attracting bees, wasps, butterflies and beetles near the entrance to Silo City.

The project was designed by Dara Friedman, a Miami-based artist and filmmaker, in collaboration with Josh Smith, Silo City's director of ecology. "River Hill" was commissioned by the UB Arts Collaboratory, with a dozen undergraduate and graduate students participating from the Collaboratory's Working Artists Lab.

"The garden is going to be so attractive to people and pollinators that I think you'll simply be drawn to it be-

cause of the vibrant colors," Friedman said recently, her work boots covered in red chalk used to mark the path. "It will smell great, look beautiful and will be a place where you come into balance."

The nectar- and pollen-rich flowers being planted include yellow falls sunflowers, purple anise hyssops, pink bee balms and hyacinths in a rainbow of colors. The plantings, which also include rows of wild roses, are occurring now, with other plantings, such as yarrow, coming in the spring.

"It's a lot more than color," Smith said. "This is to feed pollinators, but, of course, it helps to be pretty, as well, to humans."

Friedman, whose artworks are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami, conceived a large-scale labyrinth with ecologist Jean Sarmiento titled "The

Empress" that is at a Miami women's shelter. That caught the attention of Bronwyn Keenan, who founded the UB Arts Collaboratory before leaving the position this summer. Her contact with Friedman led to the Buffalo commission.

Rick Smith embraced the idea. He owns Silo City and Rigidized Steel, which the labyrinth is located behind, steps from the parking lot on the right after entering Silo City, the hulking grain complex just off Ohio and Ganson streets.

Josh Smith suggested planting a pollinator garden for the winding, 1,800-foot-long hill path to go through.

The design on a small hill is based on the "looping meander" of the Buffalo River, creating a spiral structure, Friedman said. Sixteen boulders have been set to mark pivot points on the path and suggest rocks that the river

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Project's native plants being grown at Silo City nursery

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would loop around.

"The path is something that repeats and grows and cuts back," Friedman said. "As you move forward, you appear to be moving backwards, and yet you are not."

Friedman is also drawn to a Seneca Nation of Indians legend of a large bird that plucked a sea serpent out of the Niagara Whirlpool and dropped it down to form the beginning of Buffalo Creek, better known as the Buffalo River.

Joe Stahlman, director of the Seneca Nation's Seneca-Iroquois National Museum, has helped shape the project, Friedman said, and focus it as a place where conflict resolution and the practice of peace occurs.

"My hope is this place becomes a common where you work things out," she said.

Friedman sees a strong connection between the project and her work in film.

"I see this labyrinth as an extension of filmmaking," she said. "It's a place where you get to tell your own story, and the structure of the story is the spiral meander. You pivot and see the world around you from different perspectives as you would if you pointed your camera up one street or then another."

Creating the labyrinth has been challenging.

Silo City was a floodplain before being filled in with slag. With the loss



Joseph Cooke/Buffalo News

Artist Dara Friedman is working with students as part of the UB Arts Collaboratory, Working Artists Lab on the "River Hill" labyrinth in Silo City in Buffalo.

of native plants, invasive species such as mugwort, phragmites and knotweed, the most recurrent on the land, and cottonwoods have flourished because they were able to adapt to the dry, nutrient-poor landfill.

The native plants for the labyrinth are being grown from wild seeds at Silo City's native plant nursery. The potting soil comes from chicken excrement and biochar created from burning wood. Seich soil, consisting of lake sand and fine organic material that washed up last year on Woodlawn Beach, was acquired from Buffalo River Compost and spread across the site by the students.

"We're not using topsoil, and we're not stripping farmland in Clarence to make this soil," Josh Smith said.

Smith, who oversees 27 acres along the river, said the pollinator plants have demonstrated that they can survive, despite deer that frequent the area. The nine species of perennials, planted in groups, should also make it easier to remove the mugwort expected to germinate in between, he said.

While creating more opportunities for native species, Smith said Silo City is being developed for human activity, and the pollinator garden shouldn't be misconstrued as being a nature preserve.

The American Malthouse Company building at Silo City is currently being developed by Generation Development and Rick Smith into apartments and commercial spaces, with the expectation that more properties will see development.