

Mayer/Reed to design 'Walk of the Heroines'

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By Lee Scopel

Portland-based landscape architecture and urban design firm Mayer/Reed was recently chosen to work on a tribute to women at Portland State University.

The "Walk of the Heroines" will fill a space between Hoffman Hall and the Community Recreation Field on the urban campus located in Southwest Portland. Tributes will be available for purchase, where people can honor special women by having their names inscribed somewhere in the park.

"The idea was to create a place in the city where there would be a lasting tribute to women and their accomplishments and contributions," said Johanna Brenner, women's studies department chairwoman at PSU. "We also wanted to create an endowment to support the women's studies department and include scholarships for women's studies majors."

The endowment will also help fund community programming, lecture series, workshops and visiting scholars.

A 200-foot by 90-foot gathering space, the walk will feature gardens, furnishings, artwork, special lighting and a water element. The heroines' names will be interspersed around the space on the walkway, walls, plantings, plaques, tiles or in collages.

"Our hope is to have the names very integrated in the design," said Brenner. "There won't be something that's built with names slapped all over it."

Also planned is a computerized display, where park visitors can look up the name of a heroine inscribed around the walk, and see a photograph and learn the woman's story.

Having the women's stories available is a key part of the plan, which will emphasize educating the public on women's contributions, said Brenner.

Although still in the preliminary design stages, each space throughout the park will offer a different experience.

"The physical space will express the diversity of women's lives," said Brenner. "Women are contemplative and introspective, but also assertive and active. That is the sense we are trying to get, where some parts will be places to sit and interact and others will be a place for more solitary reflection."

“It’s important that a space to honor women be complex and not unitary,” she added.

Mayer/Reed’s experience on public projects throughout the city like the Tropical Rainforest Exhibit at the Oregon Zoo, Sellwood Riverfront Park and the Portland Eastbank Esplanade won the firm the “Walk of the Heroines” project.

“They were very passionate about the project and had done a lot of research and had a really in-depth understanding of what we were trying to accomplish,” said Brenner. “From working with diverse communities, they understood how important it was to us to end up with something that appeals to many and is representative of all the communities in the metro area.”

The firm is just getting started and is in the conceptual design phase right now. The firm is working in workshops with PSU faculty and students, along with outside community members including artists and graphic designers.

Carol Mayer-Reed, principal in charge with Mayer/Reed, said the workshops have been very successful thus far.

“Certain themes have emerged that have to do with different aspects of women’s lives and contributions they’ve made,” said Mayer-Reed.

Conceptualizing the walk has provided some challenges for the design team.

“There’s a lot of synthesis involved in a project like this, which is the process of taking the words and putting them into a physical form of design and imagery,” said Mayer-Reed. “It’s going to be a wonderful project and we want it to be some of our very best work.”

There are two parallel concrete pathways in the space right now leading straight to Hoffman Hall.

A relatively well-traveled area of campus, Mayer-Reed said it could be used even more in the future. The university is planning development in that part of campus within the next decade including a new residence hall and classroom building.

“We’re taking into consideration how those new building masses will interface with what we do,” said Mayer-Reed.

Brenner said people are already purchasing tributes for the walk. Family members have come forward to honor a stepmother, a mother or a sister. One woman chose to pay tribute to a good friend who is a teacher. Students from the beginning days of the women’s studies program at PSU in the 1970s established a fund to honor the founding director, who died at a young age.

“It’s been a whole range of things from people who have passed away to people who are still alive,” said Brenner.

Mayer-Reed expects schematic design to be completed by the end of April with a fall groundbreaking scheduled.

Much of how quickly the project gets started has to do with fundraising efforts. PSU students gave a \$200,000 allocation gift and the university donated the land for the walk, which is valued at \$1.2 million. Brenner estimates they need another \$1.8 million to construct the walk and provide for the endowment fund.