

# Prairie Roots

A Public Art Proposal  
For  
The City of Marshall, Minnesota  
By Randy Walker

## Concept

Marshall is a place firmly rooted in the wide open space of the prairie. From its earliest beginnings until now, generations of people have settled here to live and define this community. The spirit of Marshall is dynamic and ever-changing, formed by the stories of the past and those yet untold stories of the future. And while there is no single story, object or person that could concisely and neatly summarize Marshall's character in its entirety, the landscape itself has always been an inextricable part of this unique community's way of life.

Just as the city and the landscape have themselves provided places for the spirit of the community to grow, *Prairie Roots* will be a work of public art that makes a place for stories to be told and events to unfold. The sculpture will be a gathering space where community's interactions are central. *Prairie Roots* is conceived as a meeting place within a sea of prairie grass. *Prairie Roots* will be a place where art merges with nature, evoking both the community of people, and the spirit of the once-dominant native plant community. The deceptive simplicity of the prairie landscape- its perpetually shifting colors, moods, and seasons- is an underlying inspiration for the artwork. *Prairie Roots* is designed to be experienced by moving through, around and from within. From every angle, *Prairie Roots* will appear differently as multi-colored abstract steel "blades" of grass present their four faces to the viewer in varying degrees. The effect, not unlike a meadow of prairie grass changing throughout the day or the seasons, will create an inner space from which to view the city beyond. A segmented stone and concrete circular seating area is bisected by two entryways that define the extent of the tall sculptural grasses and frame the glass atrium of the ice arena beyond. The focal point created by the surrounding concrete sidewalk and sculpture will be a replication of the Redwood River as it winds its way through Marshall. Rendered in iron and poured at a community event, this meandering rivulet will symbolize the timeless role that the river plays in Marshall while marking a moment of shared memory.

*Prairie Roots* will be responsive to its environment by changing with light and shadow, its slender elements designed to sway gently in the wind. By night, the sculpture will be a glowing beacon visible from a distance.

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## **Design & Construction**

*Prairie Roots* draws on both natural and cultural forms for its inspiration and design. The sculpture's primary elements will be hundreds of square steel tubes of varying lengths. These grass-like posts will be anchored firmly underground to a poured concrete footing, engineered precisely to afford sufficient rigidity while allowing movement in the wind. Each of the four faces of the steel posts will be painted a different color selected from a palette found in the surrounding landscape. All of the steel posts will be oriented to the cardinal directions. A paint system will be selected based on durability, fade resistance, and ability to be repaired in the field. Capping the ends of the posts, stainless steel "blades" will be mechanically fastened so that they point in one of the four cardinal directions and protect the hollow tube from water infiltration. These projecting horizontal surfaces will also serve to reflect light by night. In addition to prairie grasses, the post and blade assemblies are inspired by cultural forms. They can be interpreted as a collection of upturned hockey sticks, and thus make reference to the new ice arena beyond. Similarly, the sculpture's painted and polished steel recall the red gloss paint and reflective chrome of the iconic Red Barron biplane.

The immediate site will be integral to the design of *Prairie Roots*. The abstract steel blades of grass will arise from two planting beds dedicated to native species of prairie grass that will provide a natural counterpoint to their geometric counterparts. Accent lighting, too, will be located within the planting beds to animate the sculpture nightly. The central space of the sculpture will be defined by two circular concrete benches which will be integral with the footings that anchor the steel tubes, creating an efficient frost footing to ensure stability. The concrete benches will support cut Kasota limestone benches, doveled and mortared to the concrete. An exposed aggregate concrete slab will make up the ground surface at the center of the sculpture. Within this slab, a laser-cut wood form in the shape of the Redwood River will create a void to accommodate the poured iron.

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## **Collaboration & Community Engagement**

*Prairie Roots* will involve a number of fabrication processes and will rely on the collaborative efforts of with designers, stakeholders, fabricators, structural engineers, contractors. The project is envisioned as an integral work that combines site design, landscape and drainage, lighting, metal fabrication and site construction. It is the artist's intention to work cooperatively with the Spirit of the Community Selection Committee and other stakeholders to ensure that the design reaches its full potential and vision. It is also the artist's preference to work with qualified local professionals, contractors and vendors whenever possible.

The sculpture will consist of components fabricated off site as well as require extensive on site work. Because components will be relatively lightweight, much of the site installation will be accomplished without heavy equipment.

A significant part of the artistic concept of *Prairie Roots* is the idea of Marshall as a community anchored by the Redwood River. The shape of the river's meandering path forms the focal point of the sculpture. Creating this element will provide a unique opportunity for a community event in which molten iron will be poured in the channel left in the central concrete slab. The iron will be poured in such a way that it flows in the same direction as the Redwood River itself. The iron pour will establish the sculpture as a gathering space and be a metaphor for Marshall as a place founded along the river.

## **Art Conservation**

*Prairie Roots* will be designed to be maintained in the field. Primary consideration will be given to the multi-colored steel tubes with an industrial coating system that can be repaired with simple field preparation and application. High grade LED architectural light fixtures will be used for low energy consumption, minimal heat generation, and minimal maintenance requirements. Native grass species will be selected because of their integral role artistically and inherent hardiness.