

Change is on the horizon

Sculptor Jackie Ferrara brings vision to underused area on campus

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One of Tufts' best selling points is its unique location: the campus is ideally situated near Boston to provide both an urban and suburban experience.

The distinctive Tisch library roof exemplifies this fusion of environments. The secluded terrace features an expansive view of the nearby city, equipped with raised lawns that can become an unusual kind of study space or a quiet nighttime outlook. But although the view itself is outstanding, there is nothing in particular that attracts students to the roof itself.

Soon, all that will change thanks to a new project just made public last week: a commission for the first permanent outdoor art project on Tufts' Medford campus. Through a careful screening process, selected out of a pool of 165 artists, sculptor Jackie Ferrara was chosen for the construction.

Envisioning a memorial

Amy Ingrid Schlegel, Director of the Galleries and Collections at the Tufts University Gallery, played a large part in the screening process, saying, "This hasn't been that longstanding of a project. About nine months ago I was contacted by the Executive Director of Development, Eric Johnson, about two parents that wished to memorialize their son, Alex Mendell, who would have graduated this past May. They wanted to open discussions about how the University could begin to transform a site already existing on campus to achieve that aim."

After several meetings and discussions, the Tisch Library rooftop seemed the perfect location, being "the most central and most underutilized," according to Schlegel, and presenting a wealth of potential for such a generous project.

The idea was merely a concept, and in order to begin the long process, Tufts reached out to UrbanArts Institute at Massachusetts College of Art. This institution helped to define the criteria by which Tufts could evaluate artists' proposals and outline what the project ideally would produce. Creating what is known as a "RFQ," a request for qualifications, the project was added to the UrbanArts database in June, available for anyone interested in applying.

With the idea made more substantial, a committee was drawn together to represent the various facets of Tufts in order to forge some comprehensive perspective with which to pick the most qualified artist. The committee included Adele Fleet Bacow, who works as a strategic planner, Director of Tisch Library Jo-Ann Michalak, Vice President of

Operations John Roberto, Dean of Student Affairs Bruce Reitman, and the project's donors. Also brought in were two outside jurors, Patricia Fuller, representing MIT, and Paul Tucker, who founded Arts on the Point, a sculpture park at UMASS Boston.

Since the library roof is also a popular spot for outdoor functions, Tim Brooks, Director of Alumni Relations, was also involved in the planning.

Making the decision

"Located at the center of Tufts University's main Medford campus," the RFQ read, "the vision for the currently underutilized plaza is to become a magnet and focal point for students and visitors alike."

Artists considering the project were informed that "the final design may feature the following elements: landscape design, structures that accommodate seating, lighting and sculptural features that encourage quiet contemplation and reflection."

While current students consider the library roof a unique experience, the kind of sculpture the committee envisions is one that would attract more people, but maintain the serene vista, preserving the calm quality of the space, in keeping with its memorializing intention.

After the first round of evaluation, UrbanArts cut down the original list of approximately artists and teams to around 65 and then to a mere eight by the committee. Eventually, the final selection was Jackie Ferrara.

The competition alone makes Ferrara's success an accomplishment, and when asked about how the final decision was made, Schlegel said, "She's got works in such a variety of settings that she has certainly represented her abilities, and she has a visual vocabulary that is easy to appreciate."

The artist voices her vision

Ferrara shared this "visual vocabulary" in a presentation on Jan. 30 in the Tisch Library, just below the site of her future work of art. The presentation consisted of a series of slides in which she showed the range of her career, spanning from small works done for museums to larger installations in parks and schools across the country.

While as of yet there is no substantial proposal for the library roof, her style is consistent and reliable, so a display of her past works is helpful in envisioning what she plans to do here at Tufts.

Since she moved to New York in the 1950s, Ferrara has taken her place in the art world. In the 1970s she established her style, which is characterized by geometrically planned staggering of cubes and rectangular step-like formations. Many of these are reminiscent of ancient buildings, including pyramids, ziggurats, courtyards and Roman pool houses.

While she began her career primarily using wood, she has since moved towards stone works, saying that they "really have a long life" and that she started off by using wood "just because the budget was very small and it didn't occur to me that I could use other materials."

What is most fascinating about Ferrara's work is its distinctively remote quality. Many of her smaller sculptures and models are of small towers or step-like creations, stacked to balance and sometimes cut out in increments to create patterns and gradually ascending forms. These are not unlike her larger public works, which incorporate large arches, steps and platforms, commanding the space they occupy with a calculated design that has an architectural sensibility. Her works are intriguingly alien to the environment around them, rising out of the land curiously, rather than becoming infused in it.

Matching function to form

The use of Ferrara's works is not necessarily obvious: "I like the notion of there being something there that isn't apparent to everybody and that in some kind of way, people make discoveries as they meander through the place," she said. "I think of it as something that only some people may recognize."

The artist's empathy with this lone explorer fits in well with the library roof, and commenting on the site she said, "It seems to me that a certain kind of person would go there and I was wondering how they would feel about this being a place where people would go now, about not being able to go there to be alone anymore."

Her most recent work has been with concrete and granite. During the lecture, Ferrara offered hints as to what her plans are for the space, though upon being asked explicitly about her plans she said, "It's my secret. I'm not gonna tell. It's just very early in the process and I have to continue meeting with the landscape architect."

Despite this reticence, she said that she's been "hooked on arches" for some time, and upon showing a slide of some concrete arches she did along a museum walkway, she said that this is what she'd like to do again, saying, "these wonderful patterns happen with the light and the slats."

A collaboration between artists

The mathematical and historical foundations in Ferrara's work make it especially appropriate for a university setting, and she is particularly interested in patterns based on mathematical principles, attracted to their subtlety. Schlegel explained that the work will be "something multifunctional, to be used in different ways at different times of year."

She also said that Ferrara will be collaborating with a landscape architect, whose name has not officially been announced, though the artist mentioned that she hopes to work with M. Paul Friedberg, with whom she worked on Phoenix's esteemed "Canal

Demonstration Project."

Adele Fleet Bacow essentially confirmed the choice, saying that "having two artists/designers of such national stature of Jackie Ferrara and Paul Friedberg collaborating together offers an unparalleled opportunity for our university. I am waiting with bated breath to see what they present for this site."

Looking ahead

Schlegel reported that the demolition would start sometime after the commencement, and that "it should probably happen over the summer, but we want to be sensitive to the users of the library. Once the demolition does begin, [the roof] won't be in use, and we'd like to keep that period as short as possible."

The proposal will be official sometime in early March, though the date has not been set. Ferrara will be back at Tufts on May 3, at the opening reception for an exhibit at the Tufts Gallery, in which some of her past works will be on display for the public. The exhibit will be arranged by Schlegel's museum studies graduate course to shed light on her proposal for Tufts and to "help understand the underlying principles in her work," Schlegel said.

At the end of her presentation, Ferrara summed up her artistic purpose, giving an elusive, vague hint: "Even now when people ask me what I do, I still say I'm making places. I'm making a place, and it can change a lot. I've never made a rooftop before and I look forward to doing that."

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