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Polished steel sculpture draws on Fairbanks' northern light

Dermot Cole | September 18, 2014

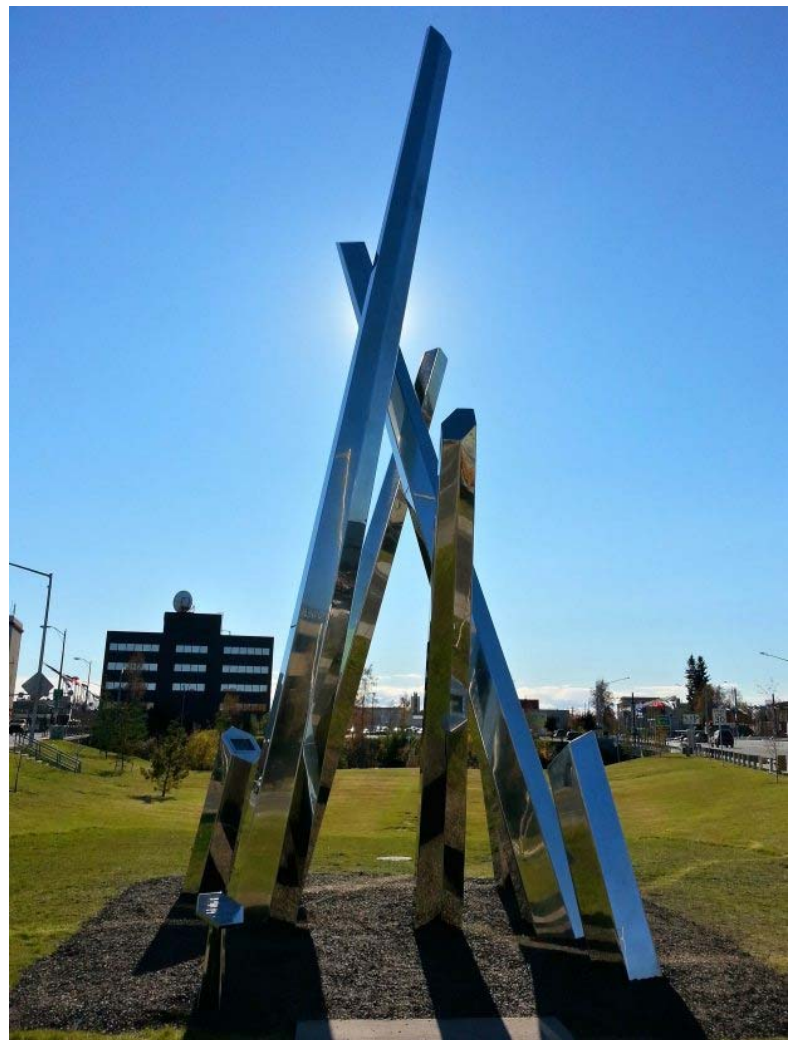
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FAIRBANKS -- The gleaming spires reaching skyward near the banks of the Chena River downtown remind some of ice crystals, while others say the shapes are reminiscent of quartz crystals or the imagined architecture of Superman's Fortress of Solitude.

At night, when the multicolored lights reflect on the steel surface, polished to a mirror-like finish, some may think of the northern lights dancing in the sky.

Artists Cheryl Hamilton and Mike Vandermeer of the Vancouver, British Columbia, studio [ie creative](#), who spent 4,000 hours sanding and polishing the steel surfaces for maximum reflection, say the idea was not to compete with the natural environment, but to complement it. Their work is named "Polaris," for the brightest star in the Little Dipper.

The six-sided steel tubes are of varying heights and angles. They appear to be growing out of the ground. The longest piece reaches up about 36 feet. On Wednesday night, the local transportation committee dedicated the sculpture and turned on the lights after sunset at about 8:08 p.m.



A new sculpture at the Barnette Street and Cushman Street intersection in Fairbanks, "Polaris," was unveiled Wednesday.

Photo courtesy Michael Vandermeer

Hamilton said Polaris will transform with the angle of the sun, the hour of the day and the season of the year.

“All we’re doing is trying to capture a shape that is engendered here in the North and reflect it back,” she said. “It will change with the sky and the environment.”

The day-to-day changes in the sky will lead to multiple interpretations. Some people may see it as a symbol of mining history, while others could argue that it represents sparkling winter ice.

“It can mark the center of a crowded civic celebration and as easily host that delicate moment of wonder as a child gazes toward the heavens,” the artists wrote in the description of the winning submission.

Their heavy-duty sculpture, built to withstand the elements, represents lots of elbow grease as well as aesthetic appreciation. On average, they spent about five hours sanding each square foot of the 800-square-foot steel sculpture. This required 10 grades of sandpaper, starting with a rough 36-grit and ending with a barely noticeable 1,200 grit.

The final preparation consisted of applying a rouge polishing compound to create the mirror finish.

“We want people to see themselves in the sculpture, and we want it to reflect the surroundings,” Hamilton said.

In the few days the sculpture has been in place, people in Fairbanks have noticed how “Polaris” modifies its look throughout the day. Not long before sundown the sculpture glows orange, while at noon it’s the brightest and most visible public monument in the city.

The \$325,000 project, funded with a portion of federal and state highway funds, came about as part of an effort decades in the making to add a new bridge and access route to downtown Fairbanks with the redevelopment of Illinois Street. The final connections in the road project, with a price tag of nearly \$24 million, opened to traffic last year.



As a result, a triangle of waterfront property on the north bank of the Chena was transformed from a parking lot to a green space. A committee of nine local residents held hearings and conducted a detailed competitive search process before choosing the proposal by the two Vancouver artists.

The committee work, led by Donna Gardino of the transportation planning group, took place because the original plan offered by the state Department of Transportation and Public Facilities prompted numerous complaints.

The first plan was for a 15-foot-high “Gateway Arch” that had the name of the town in 12-inch die-cut letters.


Hamilton and Vandermeer have been collaborating on public art projects for nearly two decades.

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