

A Secret Garden in Suburbia

Richfield's KIRCHBAK SCULPTURE GARDEN

Asphalt and automobiles dominate the intersection of 66th Street and Lyndale Avenue South in Richfield, a Minneapolis suburb of 35,000 residents. Chain stores and high-rise condominiums constitute the bustling suburban streetscape.

But hidden from easy view by a bank, housing, and a McDonald's is Kirchbak Sculpture Garden. The private haven of plantings and artworks is open to the public without gates to restrict access or signs to announce its presence.



"The Gardener," by Jack Becker, 2001
Photo by the artist

Kirchbak Sculpture Garden honors Bill and Garnett Kirchner, Richfield civic leaders, avid gardeners, and world travelers. Bill died in 1999; Garnett, now in a nursing home, lived in an apartment overlooking the garden when it was first completed. (The garden's name refers to the Kirchners and Jerry Jerpbak, with whom Bill founded Richfield Bank and Trust Co.) When the Kirchner family and their business associates decided to develop the 11.5-acre Woodlake Centre site with an expanded bank and medical building plus restaurants, housing, and a parking ramp, public art seemed a natural component.

"Our concept was an urban village where you could live, work, and play," developer Jan Henry Susee told the *Richfield Sun-Current* at the garden's dedication in September 2001. "We thought it was appropriate to include art in the concept."

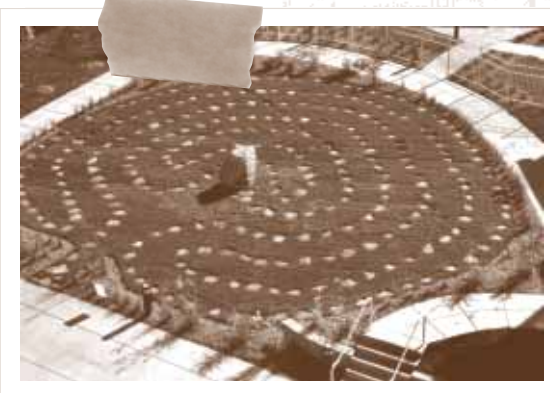
Boundless spirit amid suburban bustle

For inspiration, Susee cites the Walker Art Center's sculpture garden and municipal percent-for-art programs. He and fellow developer Steve Kirchner, son of Bill and Garnett, allocated 5 percent of the project cost to a sculpture garden that now contains more than \$300,000 worth of purchased and commissioned art. As a public amenity, the private initiative reflects the values held by the Kirchners, described by Susee as "community driven in everything they did."

Having founded Kirchbak Gardens, Inc., as a nonprofit organization, the developers worked with FORECAST Public Artworks to establish a broad framework for the sculpture park and a process for selecting local artists. "We wanted to have Minnesota artists," explained Richfield resident Tim Bumgarner, a son-in-law of the Kirchners who served as project coordinator. "We wanted to spend our money here."

A request for qualifications that circulated in spring of 2000 outlined "a broad philosophy of valuing, growing, nurturing, and celebrating." Seventy-five artists responded and, from a group of more than 40, the Kirchbak organizers selected 10 Twin Cities artists. The one exception to local talent was a sculptor from Heredia, Costa Rica, Richfield's Friendship City.

The garden space—a block-long rectangle crossed by three main walkways—is bounded by The Oaks (138 apartments), The Pines (78 assisted-living units), and a parking ramp. A stand of tall oak trees lends continuity while river birches and other recent plantings mature. The generous size of Kirchbak Sculpture Garden affords space for two environmental works, an area with statues and seating, and individual works that accentuate the views.



"Stone Labyrinth," by Derek Young,
Landscape with plantings, 2001
photo by Jack Becker

Tall stainless steel pieces anchor the axis across the garden's north-south dimension. *Jet Stream*, a kinetic totem by Bruce Stillman, stands within view of 66th Street to beckon sharp-eyed passersby. Norman Holen created *Arbor Image* as a schematic tree in stainless steel whose shapes pay homage to the massive oaks for which the apartment complex is named. Between the bright steel pieces, Zoran Mojsilov's *Napoleon* is a ground-hugging assemblage of

boulders and quarried stone beneath the old oaks. “I want it to be inviting for people to walk up and explore it,” says Mojsilov, who shaped three seats within the sculpture to accommodate visitors.

Gardens within the garden: eden in suburbia

Two artists made gardens within the garden. Derek Young, a landscape architect and earth artist, designed a labyrinth of stepping stones embedded in the lawn. This meditative space is enclosed by tall grasses and punctuated by a massive boulder. Young also contributed a sculpture that translates the Chinese calligraphy character for “Garden” into COR-TEN steel. His playful transformation of brush stroke into massive metal speaks to the travel interests of the Kirchners, who visited China many times. At the crossing of two paths, sculptor/horticulturist Craig David installed *Keepers of the Garden*, a small evergreen garden with carved limestone figures and building fragments. The life-sized keepers, a nude woman and man carved in relief, lend a whimsical touch of Eden to suburbia.

Figural works occupy the seating area parallel to the sculpture garden’s east-west walkway. A life-sized bronze gardener by Jane Frees-Kluth kneels in a patch of flowers along the path. The Kirchners’ grandson posed for her “sentinel of Kirchbak Garden,” wearing Bill’s gardening clothes for authenticity. Two bronze statues nearby embody the garden’s global concerns. *Allianza*, by Guillermo Hernández González of Heredia, Costa Rica, is a female figure clad in huge coffee leaves. Barefoot to express humility toward other cultures, the bronze is topped by a dove signifying peace. Minneapolis artist Douglas Olmsted Freeman also treats international exchange in the garden’s most recent addition, a 2004 bronze called *Seeking Peace: Jaguar and Wolf Journeys*—two sisters in animal masks, one balancing on the other’s shoulders to represent North and South America.

Several pieces link the sculpture garden proper with other elements of Woodlake Centre. Steven Woodward furnished a patio at The Oaks with smooth granite works that serve both as benches and as weighty minimalist forms. Based on the form of an open book and embellished with incised quotations, the small sculptures also evoke children’s blocks in their simplicity. Heidi Hoy and Nicholas Legeros designed five stone-and-bronze benches for The Oaks. Limestone seats harmonize with the architectural setting, while rootlike bronze legs link the benches with the stand of trees nearby.

Skeptics who find their way to the garden are impressed. ‘A sculpture garden here? Why? Then you get there and you understand.’



One of the limestone benches with cast bronze legs, by Nicholas Legeros and Heidi Hoy, 2004
credit by Jack Becker

A conundrum—getting the secret out

The art initiative at Woodlake Centre extends indoors. A colorful terrazzo floor with owl, squirrel, rabbit, and turtle designs by Andrea Myklebust and Stanton Sears enlivens a lobby in the medical building. The developers sought to encourage residents’ own collecting by paying artists from St. Paul’s Lowertown a small fee to hang

work on consignment at The Oaks. This strategy brought a few sales, but Susee described the response as disappointing.

The atmosphere of “secret garden” at Kirchbak is part of its success, yet also a concern for its founders. As Bumgarner says, “You can drive by on 66th for years and not even know it’s there. One day you look and, Shazam!” He and Susee appreciate the calm of this “island in a sea of concrete,” as Bumgarner calls it, but wish it were more widely recognized. Both acknowledge that the recent acquisition of Richfield Bank by an out-of-state corporation has dampened the initiatives they set in motion. Plans to commission a mobile for the medical building’s lobby were scrapped; hopes for a gathering place in the garden, such as a gazebo or a trellis, remain unrealized. But no one has regrets. Susee has commissioned artworks for the new offices his firm will occupy across Lyndale Avenue.

Bumgarner calls developing art for the public “a very rewarding experience no matter how you work it. You don’t have to be a nonprofit and get so exotic about it. You can buy pieces you like, when you can.”

With its suburban location, private initiative, and commitment to local artists, Kirchbak Sculpture Garden offers a rare example to other communities. Bruce Palmborg, Richfield’s director of community development, views the garden as an effective example of public art and a feature of suburban development. Skeptics who find their way to the garden are impressed, he says. “A sculpture garden here? Why? Then you get there and you understand,” he says. Its success has raised the consciousness of public art as a viable feature of Richfield’s growth.

Thomas O’Sullivan is a curator and writer based in St. Paul.

Kirchbak Sculpture Garden
66th Street and Lyndale Avenue
Richfield

Lindstrom's Larger-than-Life Couple Karl Oskar & Kristina

Since 1990, anyone who has taken Highway 8 from north of Forest Lake to Lindstrom has driven on the Moberg Trail. Signs in brown and white show the outlined figures of Karl Oskar and Kristina Nilsson, the major characters in Vilhelm Moberg's four novels about Swedish immigration to the Minnesota territory. The series inspired a later Swedish film popular with American audiences, *The Emigrants*. Karl Oskar and Kristina stand on a brick pedestal in front of the *Chisago County Press* office in Lindstrom, surveying the main street of the home they journeyed so far to reach.

Karl Oskar and Kristina stand on a brick pedestal in Lindstrom, surveying the main street of the home they journeyed so far to reach.

Swedish immigration to Minnesota began in the 1850s, just before statehood. A century later Swedish writer Vilhelm Moberg came to the Chisago Lakes area to recapture in fiction the adventures of the pioneers from Småland. While researching, Moberg stayed in the Melander house in Chisago City, traveling the roads of the county by bicycle. A bronze statue of the author, holding his bicycle as if ready to ride away, stands on a stepped platform in Chisago City's town park. This statue, by local artist Ian Dudley, was unveiled in September 1996. A week later, King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia of Sweden, visiting Minnesota as part of the 150th anniversary of Swedish immigration to America, dedicated the park itself to Moberg's memory.

A sculpture hewn by the homeland

The two literary figures of Karl Oskar and Kristina were first given artistic form in



photo by Sue Heitler

1959 when Swedish sculptor Axel Olsson's bronze monument to them was placed by the harbor in Karlshamn, Sweden, the town from which the fictional emigrants set sail on the brig *Charlotta*. Nearby is the Swedish Emigrant Institute, which now houses Vilhelm Moberg's papers. The Olsson statue (called *Utvandrarna* in Swedish) shows Karl Oskar gazing out to sea while his wife turns back for a last glimpse of the homeland they are leaving.

Moberg's novels were published in English to great acclaim between 1951 and 1961. Visitors, both American and Swedish, soon began tracing their own Moberg trail from Stillwater to Lindstrom, looking for scenes that had inspired

the author. In 1963, Lindstrom decided to change its summer festival's name and focus. Instead of the generic "Water Carnival," Chisago County's largest town would now hold "Karl Oskar Days." The new name, it was felt, would attract tourists as well as remind the community of its past.

During the renamed festival's second year, donations were sought for a statue of Karl Oskar. In 1966, the Nilssons made their debut at a Lions Club dinner.

Dressed for success in 'Amerika'

Roger David of White Bear Lake designed the 8.5-foot statue, imitating a model of Olsson's bronze original. Karl Oskar and Kristina wear their "Amerika" clothes: a jacket, shirt, and pants for him; a jacket, long skirt, and wool shawl for her. The shawl covers her shoulders and head as she turns to look back toward home. Karl Oskar's boots suggest the knee-high oak-bark-tanned ones Moberg wrote that his hero ordered in Sweden before departure. Karl Oskar polished them a shiny black before the ship arrived in New York. Although the emigrants brought little with them, at least the boots, of fine Swedish craftsmanship, would be noticed when he wore them while walking on the rough roads in America.

The figures were molded of polyurethane foam, later covered with fiberglass at the Plastic Products plant in Lindstrom. A few days after the unveiling, the brightly painted forms of *Karl Oskar and Kristina* rode the company's float in the Lindstrom parade, earning a first-place ribbon.

Just as the parade was ending and the annual fire department water fight was about to begin, a flash of lightning struck a tree near the parade route, splitting it with such force that it smoked. The rains followed, thus christening the statue on its first outdoor appearance.

David's statue rode in Karl Oskar Days parades until 1970, when Willard Smith, president of the plastics firm, gave it to the city. The statue was then painted to more clearly resemble bronze and placed on the Main Street pedestal, where it remains today.

Popular symbols beckon tourists—*Välkommen*

The *Karl Oskar and Kristina* statue has become both town symbol and trademark for Lindstrom as the town has increasingly emphasized its Swedish heritage. The house Moberg designated as theirs is now called *Nya Duvemala* (or “new” *Duvemåla*, after Kristina's hometown) and was moved to a site near the Glader cemetery, where early Swedish settlers were buried.

A brochure lists the sites that visitors interested in the Moberg stories will want to see, and each of the county towns proudly lists its Swedish Sister City link on signage.

Also beckoning tourists is Lindstrom's 1908 water tower, which gained a coffeepot spout and handle when it was repainted with a rose-maling design in 1992. Not only is Swedish coffee always on but, as the slogan states, tourists are welcomed—in Swedish, “*Välkommen till Lindström.*”



photo by Sue Hartley



photo courtesy of Chicago County Press

The *Karl Oskar and Kristina* figures are not exact duplicates of those in Olsson's work. The American Karl Oskar is pudgier and his face lacks the worried expression of the Swedish original, while the treatment of Kristina's shawl and skirt is not as graceful as in Karlshamn. These departures may be a result of working from a small model and of the qualities of the fiberglass.

In 1974, when the Swedish sculptor learned of the Lindstrom version, he felt that his work had been “perverted” and hoped that Lindstrom would remove its *Karl Oskar and Kristina* from view. That didn't happen and, as a local woman recently remarked, removing the statue for needed repainting is even problematic. During the summer, so many visitors want to pose for photographs in front of it that restoration work must wait until fall.

Moira F. Harris, Ph.D., is an art historian. Among her books are *Museum of the Streets: Minnesota's Contemporary Outdoor Murals* (Pogo Press, 1987) and *Monumental Minnesota: A Guide to Outdoor Sculpture* (Pogo Press, 1992).



Karl Oskar and Kristina
12631 Lake Boulevard
Lindstrom