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UW-MADISON FACULTY INSTALLING SALVAGED MATERIAL FOR CONDO LANDSCAPE

MADISON - Public art and ecological design come together as a pair of University of Wisconsin-Madison faculty install salvaged pieces of steel and rubble into the landscape of a trendy condominium complex in Middleton, Wis.

Sculptor Gail Simpson and landscape architect Janet Silbernagel designed and constructed a site that makes evident the cultural and biological history of a place in transition. They call it a "broken hardscape."

"As a public artist," says Simpson, "I am very intrigued by disturbed sites that have a visible history of use and re-use. These sites, which are often found in disrepair, help to tell the story of a place and [its] community."

Adds Silbernagel, "I've always been interested in how people interact with the environment - how they leave traces of culture in it or how nature affects what they do. Sites in transition have a rich and dynamic history."

The two UW-Madison faculty found their transition site at 7777 Elmwood Ave., just off University Avenue in downtown Middleton. The 1914 building, once home to the Pet Milk and Middleton Motors companies, was to get a modern facelift and become the residential urban Valencia Lofts.

Working with the commercial developer, Simpson, Silbernagel and Bea Drysdale - their project assistant and a graduate student in the art department - designed site components that would incorporate the building's history into the ecology and architecture of the space surrounding it. They did this in part by making use of materials leftover from the renovation project.

Through Simpson's metalwork, the steel trusses that once supported the roof are now trellises made with salvaged glass and stone. A four-pane crank-out window that sat atop the building will sit on the ground where it'll suggest a cold frame - a glass-covered scaffolding used to protect plants and seedlings. Metal bars, once part of the building's infrastructure, now form geometric patterns in new concrete patios.

But the project also has practical goals: to provide condo residents with private space within a public area through landscaping and sculpture, and to make better use of rainwater running off the site. With Silbernagel's landscape design, for instance, roof water will catch in rain gutters, splash down the trellises, trickle across a stepped wall filled with pebbles and then be captured in rain gardens designed to replenish ebbing ground water supplies. "We make ecological processes evident by capturing the rain water in these gardens," says Silbernagel, who teaches conservation design.

This project was funded by the UW Graduate School and involved collaboration with The Alexander Co., the City of Middleton Planning Commission, Watts Landscaping and Kenneth Potter, a civil and environmental engineering professor who designs rain gardens.

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