

'Seed Pod' invades Frank Lloyd Wright in Madison



Credit: Eric Baillies

By Jody Clowes, Special to the Journal Sentinel

Madison — Brenda Baker's big, twiggly "Seed Pod" has been nestled into the pristine geometry of Frank Lloyd Wright's Monona Terrace since October. It's huge — about 7 1/2 feet tall and 10 feet wide — and its unruly ovoid form dominates the concrete esplanade, bristling with a defiantly organic energy.

Placed with an almost comical symmetry in the center of the walkway, perfectly aligned with both Monona Terrace's rooftop fountain and the Capitol dome in Madison, it conjures up strangely opposite impressions. On the one hand, it's like a giant tumbleweed, blown in by a freak storm. At the same time, I can't escape the way it echoes an alien spacecraft (especially with Wright's retro-futuristic building as a backdrop), like the one that landed on the National Mall in "The Day the Earth Stood Still."

While the alien invader analogy may seem like a stretch, it's actually pretty close to Baker's intent. Made with the branches of invasive, or pest, species — buckthorn, honeysuckle and autumn olive — "Seed Pod" was commissioned for the Society of Ecological Restoration's conference last year, which was held at Monona Terrace. The group is all about dealing with invasive plants, the kind that might play nicely in their home

territory but become belligerent and aggressive when they crash the party in a new environment. Armed with pruners, shovels and torches, restoration ecologists struggle to contain the spread of these invasives so that native flora and fauna aren't crowded out. The ecological society's local organizing committee hoped to include art in these efforts, including an exhibition of prairie photographs by Tom Lynn and a print project organized by Yvette Pino in addition to Baker's commission. In response, Baker chose to use locally troublesome woody invasives as both the materials and the focus of her sculpture. The generic seed form of the finished piece is intended to suggest both the way that invasives spread by seed, and the idea that reseeding with natives is central to restoration ecology. Repurposing culled woody invasives for sculpture was also central to her project.

Her original idea was very different: Baker first proposed a floating installation on Lake Monona that could contribute to water quality by incorporating a filtration system powered by solar cells. After several months of exploring the logistics (and budget) for such an ambitious project, Baker retreated to more manageable territory. Nevertheless, "Seed Pod" represents a massive investment of time, energy and volunteer help, from identifying and harvesting 800-plus pounds of woody material, to removing the thorns from most of it and hammering the skeletal structure together with thousands of nails. Working with the ecological society's local art team also challenged Baker to deepen her personal understanding of restoration ecology, and siting the piece required a great deal of back and forth with the staff at Monona Terrace, who are understandably protective of their prized building.

Happily, the sculpture has been very well received. Originally intended as a temporary installation, its run has been extended through the winter. In March, it will be taken by trailer to the Milwaukee area for siting at the Lynden Sculpture Garden. Baker's piece was funded in part by a BLINK arts grant from the City of Madison, but the ecological group also made a substantial contribution, both directly and through the online fundraising program power2give. It's pretty remarkable to have a transient conference organizing committee give back to the local community by commissioning artwork, especially a large-scale work like "Seed Pod."

The arts team for the ecological society, chaired by Milwaukee landscape architect Nancy Aten, sees art as a tool for advocacy and artists as potential partners in the group's work; their own statements reflect a hope that art can galvanize local concerns about the environmental damage caused by invasives. That's a tall order with the potential to become painfully didactic. But in practice, the group gave Baker a great deal of latitude. Her concept for "Seed Pod" raised questions for some of the team, who wondered if its focus on controlling invasives left out the more positive work restoration ecologists do (like seeding and protecting native plants), or suggested that invasives are "bad" plants, ignoring their role as natives somewhere else. These legitimate concerns seem unlikely to worry anyone outside the field, however: without reading the sculpture's label, even the initiated aren't likely to recognize buckthorn stripped of its characteristic thorns, much less worry about the nuances of native vs. invasive flora.

Even apart from the commission's intent, "Seed Pod" stands as a powerful gesture. Egg-like in contour, its twiggy interior swirls out from a thick central post. The effect is like an encapsulated thicket, its potential for growth held in temporary abeyance. The play between the complexity of its inner structure and its simple outer form creates a strong tension. From a distance, its outline and sheer foreignness take precedence, while up close your eyes are drawn into the prickly interior, where dozens of small birds have taken up

residence. I'm personally most impressed by the way "Seed Pod" intervenes in Monona Terrace's severe clarity, gracing it with the sort of organic irregularity that Wright himself often introduced by including live plants, textiles and handmade objects within his buildings. It's an alien invasion of a most welcome kind.

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