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Cover Story: Cave In

Installation artist gives Omaha a new music venue

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Photo by Mike Howard

Sean Ward, an installation artist from Long Island currently based out of Oregon, just gave the city of Omaha a gift – albeit a commissioned gift. Essentially, through the vision of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Ward and a staff of interns, students and volunteers transformed approximately 1,000 square feet inside the Okada building (directly east of the Bemis across 12th Street) into a versatile, cave-like space that will be used for a variety of musical and performance art events long into the foreseeable future.

And “cave-like” is the literal way to describe it, as Ward has turned the former apartment and sculpture studio into an actual cave, complete with added stalactites drooping from the ceiling, logs placed about for seating, purposely uneven floors and an absence of windows.

What’s most significant about the installation is Ward’s closed-loop construction process. The vast majority of the materials used for construction are recycled materials from any number of origins: burlap sacks discarded by local coffee shops, phone books from a previous Bemis Center installation, found timber from various places and glass and other materials donated by the Council Bluffs Recycling Center. All these materials are utilized in unison with a wattle and cob technique that packs the material into the floors, walls and ceiling (the wattle). In all, there is zero waste involved. Nebraska red clay (the cob) covers most of the interior, making it a breathable, fire-retardant and temperate space during all seasons.

Although there is no official name for Ward’s permanent cave installation, the overall artwork is referred to as a “Pre-Conscious Space,” because, according to Ward, that’s exactly what it is. From the ethos behind the construction to its intended purpose, the cave is composed of secondhand materials free from any ethical setbacks of environmental, personal and societal nature. And they all go towards building a cave, representing one of the most basic and primitive shelters for humans reinvented and used as a versatile space for public gatherings and performances.

“It’s a pretty holistic, integrated process,” Bemis curator Hesse McGraw said. “It’s about utilizing existing resources to maximum benefit or impact.”

Both Ward and McGraw figured the patrons of the new space would settle on a simple nickname for the installation somewhere along the lines of “The Cave” or the “Bemis Cave.” “We’re just kind of going to leave it up to them,” Ward said, sitting on a log felled last year by an Omaha storm that now lies in the center of the room. He added that allowing the public to coin a name adds to the communal nature of the project and its intended use.

As of Monday, Ward and his helpers were putting the final touches on the cave space. All that was left to finish was the floor and bathroom, install the P.A. and stage and fire the clay cups that are to exclusively hold live yeast, cask-conditioned ale brewed by the Upstream at the bar stationed at one end of the room.

On the other end of the room, which holds up to about 75 people, a stage will sit illuminated by soft fluorescent lights, inducing a glacial effect, Ward said. The rest of the lighting will be electricity free for the most part, as homemade candles are perched and tucked all about the room, making the space feel calm and inviting, with the focused the attention aiming towards the stage.

While not exclusively a music venue, Ward said he envisioned it working ideally for acoustic music, although it would serve justice to any number of genres as the clay walls and lack of parallel surfaces hungrily absorb sound, leaving hints of reverberation virtually undetectable to human ears while warmly boosting the low end of the sonic spectrum.

A venue such as the cave in the Okada building adds a vibrant and unique new option for entertainment in Omaha and also effectively expands the Bemis Center. Surely, the first time guests from in or out of town step into the cave they'll be surprised such a place exists in Omaha. More importantly, it will make a much longer-lasting impression than if they would have seen the same show at, say, a dingy bar. It will also transport the audience and the performers to another place where the city and rest of the world are pushed far away. Ward's cave will be the gift that keeps on giving.

The performance space makes its official debut on July 24 in conjunction with Mutual of Omaha's "Wild About Omaha" events. Mutual provided a significant amount of funding for the project and opening day festivities include a pig roast outside the new cave and live music from local bands Vverevwolf Grehv, FATHR^, Plack Blague, Pod Blotz and Bone Rattle. The roast starts at 5 p.m. along with open studios inside the main Bemis building; the music starts at 8 p.m. For more information, visit bemiscenter.org.

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