



Villa Barr Art Park Brings Art, Nature Together

Park opens to public this fall, features artist-in-residence program

David Barr's sculptural works span the globe, from conceptual art placed in Greenland and Easter Island, to commissioned pieces in Brussels and Detroit.

They're buried underground, exhibited in museums, displayed at public spaces, and planted in nature.

More than two dozen of his sculptures also enhance the place he loved best: Villa Barr, his former home and property in Novi, which two years after his death is being transformed into a public park.

The four-acre property at 22600 Napier, north of Nine Mile, will open to the public this fall. A \$70,000 matching grant from the Michigan Council for Arts & Cultural Affairs will be used to add a small parking lot, gravel pathways, and signs this summer. The Novi Parks Foundation contributed an additional \$70,000 to upgrade the house that Barr built in 1979. The contemporary residence, which includes a studio, will be used for an artist-in-residence program and will be closed to the public.

"The parking lot and pathways will provide handicap accessibility," says Jeffrey Muck, director of Novi Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services. "Visitors won't necessarily be able to

walk up and touch every single sculpture without going off the pathway. It's meant to be a pathway designed so they can go out, view the sculptures and reflect.

"That's what David had envisioned," Muck continued. "David Barr didn't want this to be a shrine to David Barr. He wanted it to be a place where people could immerse themselves in the arts and contemplate. It wasn't meant to be a David Barr museum."

In a 2013 documentary presented by the City of Novi and Southwestern Oakland Cable Commission, Barr explained the lure of his property at Napier Road. He had built his 3,800-square-foot home there 30-some years earlier.

"It was a place without definition. I could define it myself," he told video director Paul Sutherland. "The opportunity to have this blank canvas here to do it was just wonderful. I loved living here."



The late David Barr

Life Estate

Barr sold the house, along with his studio, sculpture garden, and six of his sculptures to the City of Novi in 2012 for \$375,000. The agreement stipulated that the artist and his wife, Beth Dwaihy-Barr, both of whom were battling cancer at the time, would be allowed to live on the property until their deaths.

Barr had initially pitched the idea to then Mayor David Landry, now president of the Novi Parks Foundation.

“He said I have a problem. I’m dying of cancer and so is my wife. The problem is not with the dying, I can deal with that, but I have all these art pieces. And a problem for a sculptor is what do you do with these large pieces of art after you die?” Landry recalls the conversation.

“He said I just can’t get rid of this stuff. He said would the City have any interest in purchasing the property, giving my wife and me a life estate, and after we die developing this into



Villa Barr Residency

The Michigan Legacy Art Park is partnering with the City of Novi and Novi Parks Foundation to develop the artist-in-residence program at Villa Barr.

Painters, sculptors, dancers, photographers, musicians, poets, writers,

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**Jeffrey Muck, Director
Novi Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services**

an art park where people can come and view the art? I said it sounds like a great idea.”

City Council approved funds based on a property appraisal.

Barr’s wife died a year later and Barr, then 75, died in August 2015. Their estate subsequently donated items from the home, as well as several more sculptures to the City for the Villa Barr Art Park. Two of the 29 sculptures on site have since been donated to the Dennon Museum Center in Traverse City, and one was transferred to the Michigan Legacy Art Park, which Barr founded in 1995. The park, located on the grounds of Crystal Mountain Resort near Thompsonville, exhibits several of Barr’s sculptures, along with pieces by other artists.

Renee Hintz, Michigan Legacy Art Park director, helped form the Friends of Villa Barr, a group dedicated to maintaining Barr’s legacy “with a consistent voice” in Novi. She praises city officials for their “forward thinking” decision to purchase and develop Barr’s property.



and other artists will have the opportunity to apply for residency, and if selected, will live in Barr’s former home while working on their art for two or three months.

Noting that Barr taught at Macomb County Community College for nearly 40 years and was “very supportive” of education, Hintz says the residency would involve “some public connection.”

“Each artist will do something to engage the public,

whether that’s a field trip for an area school or a public lecture,” says Hintz. “It’s an exciting program.”

Landry envisions building a “three-season” room, paid by private donations, off the back of the house that could be used for meetings, lectures, social events, and classrooms.

“This is a long-term plan,” he says. “We’re taking this one step at a time.”

He hopes Villa Barr’s first artist-in-residence will move in this summer.

Muck plans to pay close attention to public reaction as Villa Barr evolves.

“We’re looking forward to seeing how the public uses it and how it wants us to use it,” Muck says. “It’s something Novi is going to be proud to claim as its own.”

Learn more about the Villa Barr Art Park at cityofnovi.org.