

# Pembroke Pines is First to Realize Broward County's ArtsPark Vision

BY LEON M. RUBIN



The Pembroke Pines River of Grass ArtsPark at Academic Village provides solid evidence that the ArtsPark concept that emerged from the far-reaching Broward County Community Cultural Plan 2010 is sound and strong.

The first of an eventual four ArtsParks in the county, the Pembroke Pines facility opened in 2001. Its focal point – the 450-seat Susan B. Katz Theater of the Performing Arts – hosts a variety of performances throughout the year by such organizations as the Symphony of the Americas, the Pembroke Pines Theater of the Performing Arts and Inside Out Theatre.

Situated in the Pembroke Pines Academic Village Campus, which provides a home to the Pembroke Pines Charter School, Broward Community College, Florida International University and the Broward County Southwest Regional Library, the ArtsPark is fulfilling the role that was envisioned for it and similar facilities under development elsewhere in the county.

"I am extremely proud of our River of Grass ArtsPark," notes Pembroke Pines Mayor Frank Ortis. "The ArtsPark enhances the cultural and entertainment choices for the resi-

dents of our city. We will continue to work together with our arts and education community to provide programs that offer a diverse range of cultural and education opportunities."

Diversity is the hallmark of the ArtsPark, says Robyn Vegas, the city's cultural arts coordinator. In the past year, it has welcomed a Caribbean cultural festival, a Latin jazz festival, performances of *Fiddler on the Roof* and *The Music Man*, piano concerts and film festivals. One of the largest and most popular events is the annual Arts Festival in the Pines, a fine arts and crafts festival that attracted more than 40,000 people last year. The 2007 edition is scheduled for March 10 and 11.

"We offer an opportunity for people to experience the cultural arts out west," Vegas states. "It's a chance for people who live in this area to see plays or concerts. It's beneficial for elderly residents who might not have the opportunity to go to the Broward Center for the Performing Arts."

Complementing the performances and festivals are a wide variety of classes for children and adults, including music, visual arts and drama. One of the most extensive programs is offered by Fantasy Theatre Factory, which teaches theater arts to children ages 8-13 during the school year as well as in a much-in-demand summer camp. "This is the first place where we have been able to have such a thorough residency," says Mimi Schulz, artistic director of Fantasy Theatre Factory. "We love to work with Pembroke Pines. I want to really commend them for their involvement. They are committed to bringing theater arts to the community."

Mena Yaa, president of Wawa Aba, is equally positive. Her nonprofit

cultural organization was involved in the Caribbean festival in May 2006. "The facility is wonderful. The grounds are well kept. The way the park is nestled between the buildings gives it a very nice ambiance," she says, adding that she hopes to return for a similar event in 2007.

These opportunities are available to residents throughout the county, Vegas notes. "We have some really wonderful programs here that can only grow and expand expand," she says, adding that the city is looking forward to completing the ArtsPark with the public art installation by Carl Cheng.

And the reviews? "All the comments we've had have been overwhelmingly positive," Vegas says proudly. "When people find out what we offer and that it's free or very affordable, they rave about it!"

The ArtsPark complements Pembroke Pines' commitment to arts and culture, which is further evidenced by the Fletcher Cultural Center and the City Hall art gallery. The city is home to many prominent artists, some of whom have received South Florida Cultural Consortium Visual and Media Artist Fellowships, including Ray Azcuy and Richard LaBarbara. ★





Carl Cheng's design for "Blue Room" features aerial images.

## Integral Components Public Art Enhances Projects

Not only will each of Broward County's ArtsParks be places where people can participate in the arts, but they will also help to create a sense of place through distinctive public art.

The budget for the construction of each ArtsPark includes funding for public art. In Hollywood, for example, the first phase of the Young Circle ArtsPark, which is due to open in the spring, will include a state-of-the-art fountain incorporating the design of acclaimed Japanese public artist Ritsuko Taho.

The Pembroke Pines River of Grass ArtsPark will be the next place where public art will blossom. In December, the Broward County Public Art and Design Committee approved Santa Monica-based artist Carl Cheng's proposal for "Blue Room," a large outdoor canopy that will provide shade and shelter for a variety of activities at the facility.

Cheng approached the project as he does all his public art commissions – with an open mind. "I don't project anything I might want to do until I find out what is needed in a particular site," Cheng explains. "It's totally dictated by the site." When he observed that a common area surrounded by several buildings and an outdoor stage was so hot in the summer that people couldn't stand it, "a canopy made sense to me," he says.

The 48-foot square canopy will incorporate a curved, laminated glass photomural, called "Oculus," combining digital photo images of Florida skylines, airborne wildlife and human aerial activities, Cheng points out. "The photo imagery itself speaks of our time – of what a sky might look like in Florida at this moment. I will look at all the different things people do in the sky, like hot air balloons, hang-gliding or the space shuttle.

"Having that above your head to shade you, with brilliant colors when you look at it, seemed like it would be inspiring and interesting," Cheng continues. This is Cheng's second public art commission in the county. His "Everglades Trespass 2000" juxtaposes a terrazzo floor with two skylight designs in the lobby of the Southwest Regional Library. ★

## ArtsPark Q&A

Mary A. Becht, director of the Broward Cultural Division since 1984, recently offered her perspective on the ArtsParks initiatives.

**Q.** How and when did the ArtsPark concept originate?

**A.** It was one of the recommendations of the Community Cultural (CC) Plan 2010 in response to a community-identified need for hands-on facilities for arts and culture. The idea was that an ArtsPark would be a community cultural center; a space for community theater, exhibitions, classrooms, lectures, visual, performing, literary and media arts; a place where people of all ages could participate in creating art for free or at a low cost.

**Q.** How did the concept evolve from one ArtsPark to four ArtsParks around the county?

**A.** The CC plan suggested a minimum of three – designed as a diagonal – in the northeast, central and southwest, so everyone had access. The park bond issue in 2000 set aside \$5 million for a cultural center in a park. The Broward Cultural Council recommended that the County Commission might offer those funds as a match to cities to enhance the \$5 million center.

The county requested letters of interest. We had six responses. When the commission saw the community needs and the creative plans, they selected the Hollywood ArtsPark, but later added more funding from the park bond issue for ArtsParks in Pembroke Pines and Miramar, as well as authorizing a cultural center built by the Parks and Recreation Division for a fourth ArtsPark in the Central Broward Regional Park in Lauderhill.

**Q.** What are the main benefits of ArtsParks?

**A.** Cultural centers are a vital ingredient for a healthy community. They provide programs that foster creativity, learning and socialization, which makes our community vibrant and dynamic. We need people who have participated in the arts to help grow the arts. ★