

Herb Parker: *Art in Nature*

By Devon Pettengill / CASA

IMAGINE A PLACE OF PEACE

in nature, with tall columns made of sturdy young redwood trunks and a roof of sod to offer shade for your quiet wanderings. This idyllic structure is *Labyrinth: Respite*, the recently completed sculpture installation by Herb Parker that now rises from the meadow at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden.

“I’d like it to be a spiritual connection with the material, the structure, and the environment,” shared Parker. “During a quiet time, I would think it would be a peaceful, contemplative place, just to sit and observe nature.”

For Parker, nature is not merely his inspiration, but his also his medium. Combining natural elements such as stone, plants, and packed earth with structural materials such as steel and cement, Parker creates contemporary sculptures that are architectural yet seem to rise out of the land around them.

“It’s always site-specific, or site-related. I visit the environment to

get a feel for the physical place, the mood, and the users of the space,” Parker shared.

Parker was born and raised in South Carolina. He received his Bachelor of Arts and his Masters of Fine Art from East Carolina University in North Carolina, and also studied in Cortona, Italy. In addition to his nature-based works, he makes small sculptures and draws. He is a professor of sculpture and former department chair at the College of Charleston, in South Carolina.

Parker has no formal architectural or horticultural training. His pieces are a result of research, experience, and the knowledge of the locals wherever he is working, whether it be Illinois, Italy, or Japan.

The *Labyrinth* Parker created for the Botanic Garden, which resembles a Roman temple and is about 15 feet tall at its highest point, was built during several weeks of May with the help of an assistant and volunteers from the community. At the center of the labyrinth is a seating area made of large stones taken from what



Herb Parker



Labyrinth: Respite, redwood, sod, & rebar, by Herb Parker



The construction of *Labyrinth: Respite*, by Herb Parker

was left of the foundation of the Garden’s Gane House, which was destroyed in the Jesusita fire.

After Parker has returned home, *Labyrinth: Respite* will continue to evolve as Botanic Garden gardeners plant native California plants on the roof of the structure, mirroring the blooming spring landscape around it.

The natural beauty of Parker’s creation is in stark contrast to the evidence of nature’s fury left by the Jesusita fire.

Despite the fire’s destruction of two thirds of the Garden’s grounds, Parker’s project went forward as it had been planned for more than a year.

“It gives the people here something to focus on,” Parker shared. “I hope we boost people’s spirits.”

The Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, located at 1212 Mission Canyon Rd, is open 9am-6pm daily. For more information, call 682-4726. See more of Herb Parker’s work at www.cofc.edu/~parkerh.