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Cliff Bellamy: The Leaf – a new beacon for Central Park

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Two months ago, The Leaf, a new open-air stage and space in Durham Central Park, was the equivalent of a kit with steel pilings, pieces of wood and blueprints. When Durham Central Park board members told me construction would begin in July, I was skeptical.

Then in early July, I was in the neighborhood and noticed that the steel pilings had already been placed in the ground. Students in the architectural school from N.C. State University were on site with hardhats, trying to place the seventh and final piling in the ground. The structure already resembled its conceptual scale model, and my skepticism was confounded.

Earlier this month, I dropped by and a group of students from Duke were helping with landscaping. The cypress “fins” that help provide shade to this oval structure were installed and complete.

Now The Leaf is waiting for some final touches and an official opening ceremony, after which the first visitors will get to enjoy the new space. The N.C. State architecture students who designed, fabricated and built this structure in short order did it as the project for a class that Durham architects Ellen Cassilly and Randy Lanou taught.

Durham owes these students, their teachers and the donors who made this \$30,000 project possible a debt of gratitude.

Completion of The Leaf comes during a difficult time for this block of Durham Central Park. The new structure sits in the curve of the sidewalk a few feet south of Liberty Warehouse and the George Watts Hill Pavilion for the Arts. The city condemned the warehouse after part of the roof collapsed in May. Several arts groups and businesses were displaced, including Liberty Arts, which fabricated metal structures in the pavilion.

The fate of this block of Foster Street is in limbo, but completion of The Leaf gives me at least a measure of hope.

Before the warehouse roof collapsed, this block of Foster Street had become an arts hub – with The Scrap Exchange and Liberty Arts as principal anchors – one accessible to people of all income levels. The green spaces on both sides of the street have become welcoming public spaces – where people can play instruments, show films or just gather for fun. Two years ago, I organized a reading, and about a dozen of us sat in the park under the shade trees near Liberty Warehouse and shared selections from Jack Kerouac’s writings. No one bothered us or asked what we were about. (Kerouac would have loved this city’s brick buildings.)

The city announced earlier this week that work on part of the condemned warehouse was complete, and that condemnation signs would be removed after a final inspection. Work on the southern end of the warehouse where the roof

collapsed will begin soon. No one really knows what ultimately will happen to this historic building. Whatever happens, I would hate for this block of Foster Street to lose its welcoming, everyman character.

The Leaf has the potential to carry on the park's ecumenical, creative spirit. When they designed The Leaf, the students were conscious of the mission of the park. They designed a space where people can put on small stage shows, read or sit and watch their children play.

Besides The Leaf, this block of Foster Street also has the Farmers' Market, and nearby on Rigsbee is the skate park. With these public spaces, and the new businesses nearby, could it be that Durham Central Park has become too successful for a Liberty Warehouse rebirth to fail?

I expect The Bulltown Strutters and The Scene of the Crime Rovers to show up at The Leaf. And if you hear someone slogging through "Birdland" on cello, it might be me.

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