

The Editor's Desk: 'Nest' shows public art program can work well

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When the initial drawings of what Maureen Kelly's sculpture "Nest" would look like in the Classic Center's new Atrium were released, some of us in the Banner-Herald newsroom — OK, it was mostly me — opined that we could do much the same thing with PVC pipe, a few cans of red spray paint and a bunch of rolls of aluminum foil.

Turns out, maybe not.

For various reasons, I wasn't able to attend any of the formal events celebrating the opening of the Atrium and the formal unveiling of "Nest."

So, on Wednesday afternoon, I walked from the newspaper office to the Classic Center to take a look at the work, fully expecting to be underwhelmed by something I expected would look at home hanging over the food court of your average shopping mall.

Turns out, nuh-uh.

First encountering "Nest" from the top of the stairs on the Thomas Street side of the Atrium, I was amazed at how the sculpture, suspended from the ceiling above the stairs on the Foundry Street side of the structure, brought a more human scale to the soaring space.

For me, from that perspective, the long metal bars of the sculpture echoed the railroad tracks that have long traced through the area, connecting the work to its site in what was, to me, a surprisingly concrete way.

Also somewhat surprisingly, the curved metal panels of "Nest" somehow seemed to be an extension of the tree-filled landscape far beyond the tall Atrium windows.

Then, gazing up at “Nest” from the bottom of the Foundry Street stairs, I was taken aback at the massive up-close size of the work, and at how the bars and metallic panels, though appearing to have considerable weight, nonetheless seemed to float above the space. But my experience went beyond the work itself. As I stood at the bottom of the stairs, somewhat self-consciously gazing at the work, someone standing nearby walked up, volunteered that he liked the sculpture, and asked what I thought.

He liked the way it filled the space, he said, and I talked about how I was impressed with how it seemed to hang so lightly above the stairs.

From there, a pleasant conversation between two strangers ensued — a conversation that likely never would have taken place without “Nest” to have spurred it.

So, I like the sculpture — for its technical expertise, the way it references its site and for what it does with the scale of the interior space. And I like it, too, for its demonstrated — to me, anyway — potential to spur social interaction.

So is “Nest” worth the \$100,000-plus in local sales tax dollars spend to put it in the Atrium? From my perspective, yes, it is. While I remain somewhat mystified as to exactly how price tags are put on art, I’m willing to say that, from my perspective, “Nest” represents money well spent.

That’s not to say I won’t continue to view the local public art program somewhat skeptically. I’m still leery of the idea that choosing art for public spaces by committee makes much sense, or puts particularly compelling art in the public realm. I am, though, willing to concede that “Nest,” in and of itself, shows that a public art program can work to the benefit of the community.