

A new leaf

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DURHAM -- Imagine a public space where you can play a musical instrument, listen to a small concert, view an outdoor film screening, or just sit in a shaded area. Construction on a new space that can accommodate those and other activities will begin in July in Durham Central Park.



The new space is called The Leaf, and will sit in the arc in the sidewalk on the side of the park where the Liberty Warehouse and Liberty Arts Pavilion are. The structure, whose shape resembles a leaf, will have seven steel columns, and a series of wooden fins that will hang from several steel ribs that connect the columns. Those wooden pieces will help create shade, while at the same time allowing visitors to see through the space. The space will have benches. A piece of fabric, which can be removed when desired, will sit on top of the structure and provide additional shade.



The structure was designed and is being built by a group of N.C. State University students of architecture, who have been taking a class that Durham architect Ellen Cassilly, of Ellen Cassilly Architect, and Randy Lanou, who owns Build Sense, have been team teaching. "We told the students, We want a place to sit and a place to perform," Cassilly said, although she suspects once the structure is built, more of the latter will

take place.

In their design, the students took into consideration practical issues, as well as the mission of Durham Central Park. The students first went to the site, and met with members of the Durham Central Park board and other potential users of the space, said Ben Minachi, a student in the program. "The concept was to have this shading structure," he said, but allow for concerts, puppet shows, film screenings, and, equally important, a place where parents can sit and be able to watch their children play, Minachi said. (The structure is near the cardinal and turtle climbing sculptures.)

Students also took into account safety: Because the structure is transparent, no one can hide in it, he added.

The structure takes advantage of its angle to the sun, and some portion of the

space will have shade all times of day. "We did extensive lighting and shadow analysis, and we found that all times of day there will be shade," Minachi said. One challenge for the students, Cassilly said, was to determine "how much shade can we create just by adjusting the [wooden] fins."

In addition to the Liberty Arts Pavilion, the park has the Farmers' Market Pavilion and a skate park. Durham Central Park also is becoming a popular public space. In recent years, the park has been the site of an organized water fight, the Community Portrait of Durham, the monthly Durham Cinematheque outdoor film screenings, and other cultural and recreational events. The new space will not compete with those activities. "We didn't want this big monstrosity to be put in the middle and take attention from something else," Minachi said. The new area will be "part of the entire experience."

The space is the size of about two or three parking spaces, Cassilly said. The columns are about 14 feet high, Minachi added.

"We created a vision for making this area an interactive play area," said Lee Ann Tilley, a member of Durham Central Park's executive committee.

A \$12,000 donation from Duke Energy provided the seed money for the structure, Tilley said. The structure will cost \$30,000, and Durham Central Park is trying to raise \$13,000 using the Kickstarter website (about \$5,000 of which has been raised). The cost is a bargain for Durham, she said. "This would be a major expense if we had to pay the designers," Tilley said.

Once The Leaf is installed, it will become part of Durham Central Park, said Beth Timson, assistant director of Durham Parks and Recreation, who is in charge of park planning and maintenance. Right now, Parks and Recreation is working out an agreement with the Durham Central Park board on long-term maintenance of the structure, she said.

Students were already fabricating the structure earlier this week. "Right now we are waiting on some steel members so we can weld them together," said Devin Bradbury, a student in the class. The students also will do the site work on the structure's installation, which their teachers will supervise, he said.

Designing something and getting to build it has been a valuable experience, Bradbury said. "We have not been able to get on that side of design work," he said. "I'm real excited about it."

"The students have a lot of work to do," Cassilly said, "but they have a lot of energy."