

Her Work Reflects 'Spirits' of Cadman Plaza

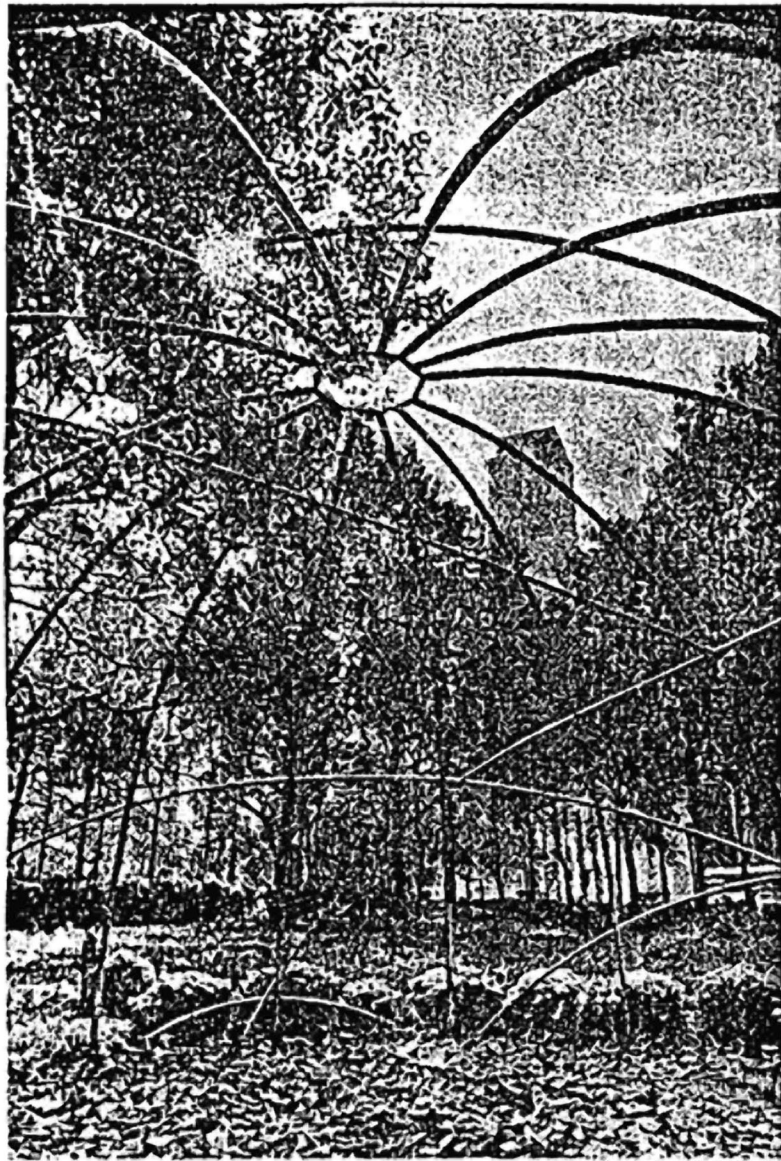


Photo by Brian M. Ballweg

The Cadman Plaza sculpture "Spirit House" was inspired by former residents of the area now known as Brooklyn.

It was not intended to be a plaything, but Manhattan sculptor Hera is pleased when children climb her galvanized steel-pipe sculpture "Spirit House" in Cadman Plaza.

The dome-shaped structure, 11 feet tall and 18 feet in diameter, is near a replica of a sweat house used by the Eastern Woodland Indians who once lived in the area that is now Brooklyn.

It was customary in those times for Indian men to undergo a spiritual purification ritual in a wigwam fashioned from saplings and covered with animal skins. Prayers were recited in the steam that rose when water was poured on stones that had been heated and placed in a pit inside the wigwam.

Hera, who takes her name from the mythical Greek goddess of women and a consort of Zeus, had no notion of what she was creating last March when she began designing the sculpture. It took shape "intuitively," she says.

She had been walking around Cadman Plaza, photographing the site the Parks Department allowed her to use on the plaza between Tillary and Johnson Streets in Brooklyn Heights when, "It came to me that this was not just Cadman Plaza, that there was something there before."

What was there before, she found out in a search through Indian archives, was an Indian trail near which lived the chief of the Marehawiecks, an Algonquin tribe. The discovery was to become her inspiration for the sculpture. "I wanted to build a monument to commemorate the presence of the Native American" in Brooklyn," she says. The most of the city 15,000 Native Americans live in Brooklyn.

Hera had already designed the work and named it when further research at the Museum of the Ameri-

can Indian in Manhattan revealed that her design bore a close resemblance to the wigwam style of the Marehawieck Indians. Still later, it was identified as a sweat house by Michael Bush, a Mohawk Indian who is director of the American Indian Community House in the city.

"I wanted to embody the spirit of the Indians who lived in Brooklyn, and then I found out it was a true spirit house," Hera says.

Adding to the string of coincidences that seemed to flow from her first intuitive nudge, Hera noted that when her permit to exhibit the sculpture in Cadman Plaza expires at the end of November, the work will be installed permanently in a 96-acre sculpture park in St. Louis. The significance, she says, is that large numbers of the Eastern Woodland Indians moved west as far as the Mississippi River.

Visitors entering "Spirit House" will feel a specific vibration, Hera claims. "It has a definite energy that it creates by the space it encompasses." And its airy design was intended as an environment where one can unwind. "I figured we have enough solid walls in Brooklyn," she said, "and we don't need more. We need to have meditative spaces in contrast with the normal stressful environment."

The work was financed by the New York State Council on the Arts under the sponsorship of the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens.

At a dedication ceremony two weeks ago, Floyd Hand, who says he is a grandson of the Sioux chiefs Red Cloud and Crazy Horse. Hand, a Native American spiritual leader and a spokesman for the Black Hills Sioux Treaty Council conducted a smoking ceremony, passing around a pipe among guests who sat in a circle.

—Merle English