

BETWEEN THE BADLANDS AND THE BLACK HILLS THE SCULPTURE PROJECT

by Tomas Lipps
photos: Steve Babbit

PASSAGE of WIND and WATER

Main Street Square, Rapid City, South Dakota A Metropolitan Metamorphosis

A one-acre macadam parking lot in the heart of town was transformed into a civic plaza and outdoor gathering place enlivened by, among other things, a world-class sculptural tableau that celebrates the natural and cultural history of the region.

Not long after this photo was taken, a Public Art Design competition for the initial phase of sculptural installations in the square was announced. The budget was \$110,000; I know that because I was in the act of preparing a proposal for it.

It was an unusual site-specific situation; the canvas was not blank. The project had already been initiated—in 2011 a number of pre-sculpted stone blocks had been designed, fabricated and installed.

These rudimentary granite forms had contrasting layers of different types and colors of granite. They had been shaped to create abstract forms that were geographical in character and suggested mountain ranges, hills, bluffs, spires.

These granite 'blanks,' twenty-one in all, were arrayed along two sides of the new Square, creating a screen between its interior spaces and the traffic on the street.

The grouping along Main Street was identified by the landscape architect, Deane Rundell, as the *Badlands Tapestry Garden* and the grouping along Sixth Street as the *Black Hills Tapestry Garden*.

At the corner, framing the entrance to the Square, were two stone spires intended to represent the settlement of Rapid City.

Deane Rundell's firm, Rundell Ernstberger Associates, won a competition in 2010 for the design of the square. The firm was based in Indiana and, visiting South Dakota for the first time, Rundell was impressed by the topography and chose to incorporate it in his design by creating a simulacrum of the surrounding mountainscapes in the arrangement of the pre-sculpted stone place-holders.

At the outset it was anticipated that the blocks would be sculpted one by one, year after year for twenty-one years by a succession of selected



artists. By having the twenty-one granite 'blanks' in place the areas designated for artwork areas would not be empty.

Well before the deadline for proposals, however, the RFQ (Request For Qualifications) was withdrawn. The project had been altered. An influential benefactor had come forward and the scope was enlarged to encompass the entire artwork project. To insure consistency there was to be only one sculptor and the budget was now \$2,000,000. This was well out of my league; I withdrew, but kept an eye on the proceedings.

A new RFQ was circulated widely and 88 artists from around the world applied.

Fifteen semi-finalists were selected and prepared design proposals to articulate the Main Street Square granite blocks and pillars with subtractive or additive sculpture: carving away and/or adding special features.

From those artists, five finalists were chosen: Andrew Dufford, Denver; Mikyoung Kim, Boston; Dale Lamphere, Sturgis, South Dakota; Masayuki Nagase, California; and Yoshikawa Wright, Los Angeles. The five traveled to Rapid City, were introduced to the community and given tours of the region. Then each finalist was awarded \$10,000 to prepare and deliver a final proposal.

The selection committee deliberated and selected Nagase, a Japanese sculptor living in the Bay Area of California.

"My overall goal as an artist is to express the essence and beauty of nature and to work with metaphors that inspire and connect people with nature in their region."—Masayuki Nagase

Nagase, or 'Yuki' as he likes to be called, estimated it would take five years to complete the project. He commenced in the spring of 2013 and has returned each summer to continue embellishing the flanks of the granite blocks with his elegant formulations.

His vision for the project was based on wind and water, the fluid forces constantly present throughout the region's geological, natural and cultural history:

"I chose the two natural elements of wind and water as the major visual themes. . . in nature, wind and water are ever-present and interacting with all life. . . wind carries seeds, erodes, uncovers and changes the form of the land. . . water, the source of life that sustains all beings. . . also changes the land. . . this design is based on the energy and force of nature that brings and sustains life. I view nature as the ever-changing and continually evolving energy of life."

He determined that the Badlands Tapestry Garden along Main Street would be associated with water and that wind would be the theme for the Black Hills Tapestry Garden along Main Street.

THE BLACK HILLS GARDEN TAPESTRY

Water is the central visual theme:

" . . . an abstracted pattern of water moving across the surfaces of the stones, creating a unified pattern. . . impressions of the movement of nature and humans across time . . . the flow of energy."

Water is expressed as a source of life that empowers natural and cultural evolution:

" . . . the arising of mammals and human beings. . . waves of change. . . the coming of horses, wagons, more people and the interaction and energy flow that is created."

THE BADLANDS GARDEN TAPESTRY

Wind is the metaphor at play here, wending its way through geological, natural and cultural history:

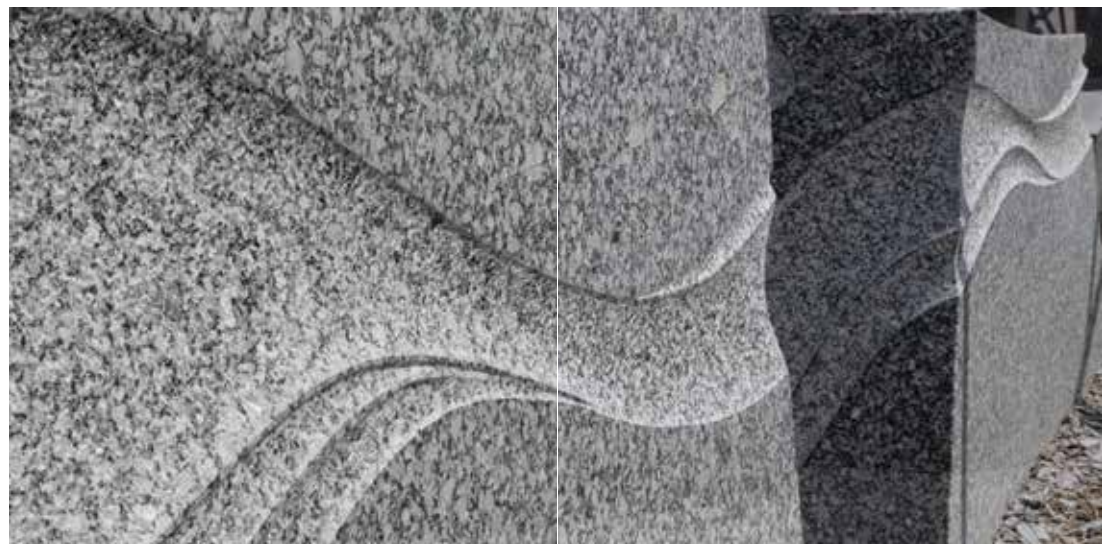
"Fossils from the ancient ocean and the evolution of mammals. . . interaction of humans with mammals. . . their interconnectedness and surviving together. . . energy emerging from nature. . . opposing forces . . . breaking apart. . . transforming. . . new roots growing underneath the surface."

THE SPIRES

The thematic association of the Black Hills Spire with wind continues, as does that of water with the Badlands Spire. The forces flow towards the spires and spiral upwards in patterns containing abstracted forms of flora and fauna and human handprints .

Over the course of his work in Rapid City Yuki became a well-regarded member of the community, endeared to them by his personality as well as the quality of what he was creating in Main Street Square at the heart of the community.

His presence on the square each summer and his activity in the schools energized the town's cultural life. Someone was inspired with the idea to paint a mural of the neighboring Badlands landscape on the wall of one of the buildings that faced the square. That was done, and done quite excellently. The square has, as well, periodically become a stage for a local troupe of dancers that performs among the sculpted stones.





MAIN STREET SQUARE, COMPLETED