

ARTIST: Dan Corson
ARTWORK/YEAR: Rays (2013 ongoing)
REGION: North America
RESEARCHER: Jessica Fiala

Council Bluffs, Iowa, has been transforming over recent years. In 2004 the Iowa West Foundation spearheaded a community-wide public art master plan and since then they have worked to integrate public art into sites across the city. One strategic aspect of this work has entailed revitalizing a section of the Missouri River—facilitating better access to the river, cleaning up formerly industrial spaces, and encouraging recreation. A significant component of this effort was the creation of Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park to serve as a gathering space for concerts, festivals, and events, as well as a flood plain between the river and the levee that protects the city.

Coinciding with the park's launch, Dan Corson's interactive light installation *Rays* opened in 2013 and has become a landmark piece for the park. An ambitious project, *Rays* is an elaborate light work that animates the park's 5-acre Great Lawn. The project also serves two core functional purposes for the renovation of the riverfront: drawing people toward the river and enlivening the park after dark.

Early site visits provided inspiration for the project design. Walking across the pedestrian bridge that connects the cities of Omaha and Council Bluffs, Corson noticed the natural movement of ice flows breaking and turning in the river's current. In contrast, the expansive Great Lawn reminded Corson of the geometry and scale of formal European Gardens. These two elements informed the development of designs and patterns of shifting lights that spread across the main 680 by 475 foot area (roughly 207 by 145 meters) of the Great Lawn, and at moments reach all the way across the river to Omaha.

Beyond the beauty and attraction of the lighting itself, a core strategy for attracting visitors to the park was the incorporation of interactive components within the lighting sequences. From evening until dawn, *Rays* cycles through half-hour intervals, each incorporating two randomly selected games between sensing sequences. When sensing, *Rays* uses radar detectors to project spinning patterns in areas of the park where it senses movement. When in game mode, *Rays* selects from eight game options that range from chasing games to collaborative efforts, each lasting three to six minutes. The game "Easter Eggs" invites players to move through a series of gestures to prompt short visual "prizes." "Flash Mob" asks participants to organize,

and if more than 55% of people on the lawn rush into a huddle and then run out again, lights swirl wildly. "Stealing Dorothy Hamill's Spotlight," named after the famous figure skater, shines a spotlight on one person while other players try to trick the program to steal the spotlight away. By incorporating interactive components into the design, Corson sought to invite park visitors to actively play with and alter the space through their participation.

In addition to human-scale interactive elements, *Rays* was designed to accommodate change in natural cycles. A major flood event originally delayed the project's installation by two years and part of the site's function is to serve as a flood plain. *Rays* thus serves as a vibrant piece that can fill the space while also being mounted out of reach of floodwaters. Additionally, the work was designed to change colors with the seasons to complement the color variations of the Great Lawn, from green grass in spring and summer, to a brown field in autumn, and snow cover in winter.

Since the park's opening, the waterfront has continued to evolve. The Great Lawn has become a regular gathering space for festivals and events and, nearby, office buildings, apartments, and businesses are under construction. Such large urban changeovers bring with them a variety of debates, from gentrification to questions of access. In Council Bluffs, the riverfront's renovation is still unfolding and, as years go by, it will be worthwhile to see how the region develops through and with public art as a driver.

In the meantime, *Rays* has already served as a key steppingstone in the effort to encourage usage of the waterfront. While notable for drawing in new visitors, *Rays'* playful invitations and intricate sequences also add color and light to neighborhood routines. Reflecting on the experience of the work's installation, Corson remarked on the regular usage of the park throughout nighttime hours, from kids and adults playing in the evening, to parents with awakened children in strollers at 3 a.m., to joggers starting at 4:30 a.m. Commenting on the project's ability to engage such varied audiences, Corson noted, "I think that because it's a visceral experience and it's easily accessible, everyone has their own take on it. It is open-ended enough that people can pull patterns or imagery from it that may or may not correspond to where my initial inspirations came from" (interview with researcher).

Alongside the revival of the area, the renovation of the park itself has continued, with the addition of water features and playful interactive

public art installations, characteristic elements that Iowa West Foundation Special Projects Manager Rich Sorich commented “really started with Dan’s work back in 2013.” Situating *Rays* within the larger public art master plan for Council Bluffs, including renovations in and around Tom Hanafan River’s Edge Park, Sorich emphasized the site-specific nature of the work being commissioned, underscoring that a driving approach has been to ask, “Not only what do you want the master plan to accomplish,” but, “what is it at that site that you want the artwork to do?” In this vein, Sorich noted, “Dan’s work really is a draw. It attracts people to an area where no one used to go...it’s interactive play...it isn’t just something that you look at and admire, but you can become a participant in it.” Echoing the significance of the project as a starting point for the riverfront revitalization, Iowa West Foundation Director of Communications Nicole Lindquist commented, “Dan was the kick-off of our placemaking focus” and, furthermore, she noted the project’s role as an iconic work for Council Bluffs, part of what is becoming the recognizable identity of the place (quotations from researcher interviews with Iowa West Foundation staff).

Commissioner: Iowa West Foundation

Project team:

- Dan Corson, Lead Artist
- Lisa Passamonte Green, Mike Mahlum (Visual Terrain) Lighting Design Firm
- Chris Barbee, John Jenkinson (Bandit Lites) Installers
- David Beaudry (Beaudry Interactive) Interactive Design
- Brad Haynes (light board programming)