

# 'A SENSE OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY'

## Three sculptures celebrate a historic neighborhood

Story by Amanda Karioth Thompson, Arts Consultant

Though John Birch may have embarked on his sculpting journey later in life, he has certainly made up for lost time. In the thirty years since he first started carving, Birch has created hundreds of pieces. Many are in private collections, but dozens can be seen throughout Tallahassee at schools, churches, public parks, golf courses, and in front of municipal buildings. All of the sculptures are made from wood, and all of them have been created with his favorite tool, a chainsaw.

Birch wields his chainsaw with surgical precision to coax organic forms and figures out of the remnants of previously standing trees. Navigating the grain of the wood and its natural imperfections, Birch works intuitively, paying close attention to what the wood will allow. Using a subtractive process, he removes everything that isn't part of the sculpture to reveal the images inside.

Birch's work is highly sought after, and he offers a simple explanation for that. "There's a waiting list for my carvings because Tallahassee loves its trees. When a tree comes down, we want to cry. This is a way to do something in remembrance of that tree."



Tallahassee sculptor John Birch takes a seat in "Community," one of three new artworks he created for the History and Culture Trail.  
PHOTO BY AMANDA KARIOTH THOMPSON

Birch is one of the seven artists selected to create artworks for the Blueprint Intergovernmental Agency's History and Culture Trail. This project seeks to recognize and honor the historical contributions and cultural impact of the communities adjacent to the FAMU Way Corridor, an east-west roadway from South Monroe Street to Lake Bradford Road.



Prior to carving, the wood section for the centerpiece sculpture weighed 10.4 tons. PHOTO BY TATIANA DAGUILLARD

Part of the Blueprint Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project, the History and Culture Trail represents a \$1.1 million investment that leverages a \$315 million Blueprint infrastructure investment in the Southside.

After years of extensive research and community involvement, informational panels will be installed along the 1.5-mile trail to display images and historical material about the neighborhoods, businesses and individuals who lived and worked in the area. The Trail will also include 12 new pieces of public art, the most significant infusion of outdoor public art in Tallahassee-Leon County history. These works are vital in further enhancing and interpreting historical accounts while offering additional opportunities for engagement.

The inclusion of art into any environment plays a significant role in sustaining cultural identity and creating a sense of place. The return on investment is substantial. Public art serves as a tourism driver, encourages lasting economic growth, and contributes to business development. It fosters community pride, connects citizens to their shared history, and makes cultural heritage a tangible community asset.

Construction of the FAMU Way Corridor involved the removal of several live oak trees. Due to his highly specialized expertise, Birch was asked to supervise that work with the intent that the salvaged wood be used as an artistic element along the History and Culture Trail. In Birch's capable hands, the preserved wood has been transformed into three large sculptures that showcase both form and function.

"When thinking about what these sculptures would represent, we talked about imagery of the Boynton Still Quarters neighborhood including an homage to Shingles Chicken," Birch explained. Shingles Chicken House was a beloved restaurant and community landmark that drew people from all walks of life. Folks would gather to eat, listen to music, play games, and spend time together.

The 9-foot-tall centerpiece sculpture, titled "Community," celebrates this convivial atmosphere with a table and two chairs carved directly into the hollow of the tree. Birch included a stylized, dimensional rendering of Shingles Chicken House as it would have appeared to residents many decades ago. The centerpiece also includes a child's hand clasping an adult's, symbolizing multi-generational connectedness.

The two other sculptures feature seating as well as a recurring motif of hands. The 6-foot-long bench, titled "Your Move" is comprised of two cupped palms. Its central gameboard serves as an open invitation for visitors to play a few rounds of checkers or chess. The elegant fingers of "Metamorphosis," a throne-like chair, serve as a comfortable perch for a butterfly and a sitter. All three pieces have been installed in the newly constructed Community Gathering Space, which was built as part of the History and Culture Trail to honor the spirit of the surrounding neighborhood.



Birch carved nearly every day for six months to complete the three new sculptures. PHOTO BY EMMA TANSKI

Birch spent a considerable amount of time analyzing the wood and planning the approach he would take for each sculpture. "In the beginning, the work is more thinking than cutting." He starts by studying the tree to understand where the cracks and weak points are and then he identifies areas that need reinforcement. Even with thoughtful preparation, Birch has learned to expect the unexpected.

"I did not realize how hollow the tree for the centerpiece was and I had to reimagine the entire composition. I was doing a plunge cut with a very long saw and it made a noise that wasn't natural. It reminded me of breaking glass. I made a hole, reached my hand in, and pulled out four small footballs, a tennis ball, five marbles, a sand-filled sock tied with a knot, a baby doll's arm, several tin cans, glass bottles, a piece of a garden hose, a lot of bricks and pieces of asphalt, some bicycle parts, and other things I couldn't identify. There was an open hole in the tree about 12 or 15 feet off the ground and a bicycle rim had been screwed into the bark for a basketball hoop."

In addition to years' worth of accumulated items, Birch ran into plenty of nails which can pose a threat to his tools and his safety. "Quite a few teeth of the chains were broken because of those thick nails. I intentionally keep chains that are about to be thrown away for the purpose of exploratory carving, so I don't cry when I break a \$50 chain."

Birch is fastidious about caring for his tools and himself. He wears ear protection, gloves, and safety glasses as well as a face shield, dust mask, heavy jeans and steel toe boots, even in 90-degree heat. "In the summer, I have to change my clothes at least twice a day." It took Birch six months to carve the three sculptures, working between June and November of 2022.



"Metamorphosis" with painted butterfly detail. PHOTO BY EMMA TANSKI

Moving the immense sculptures into place required a coordinated effort between the artist, Blueprint and City of Tallahassee staff, and independent contractors. The centerpiece, bench, and chair, with their respective weights of approximately five tons, 1,000 pounds, and 500 pounds, presented quite the logistical challenge. Though the artworks have an imposing presence, their organic forms nestle comfortably into the Community Gathering Space on FAMU Way. They offer a warm welcome and encourage visitors to engage with one another.

"With these works, I'm hoping to convey closeness, getting together, playing games, eating together, taking a walk in the park, and enjoying nature. I wanted there to be a generational aspect to these pieces. I wanted to put a sense of family and community into them."

To learn more about Blueprint's Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project, click here:  
<https://blueprintia.org/projects/cct-segment-3-amenities/>