

# Art puts park under lock, key

## Few on fence over exhibit that closes Mount Vernon green space

By John Woestendiek and Sam Sessa

Baltimore Sun, March 20, 2008

When she planted crocus bulbs in [Mount Vernon Place](#), Amanda Johnson was looking forward to seeing them bloom in spring - "just a few little flowers to give me hope every morning as I walk to work," she said.

This week though, and through March 29, what Johnson and other residents who live along the park's four grassy squares are seeing is a 7-foot-tall chain-link fence, spray-painted gold, that has essentially shut down the park.

The gold fence - a work the artist says is intended to increase public appreciation for the park - is the first phase of an outdoor exhibit that will be on display through late May.

But since the weekend, when the fence closed off access to what is considered one of the more scenic spots in Baltimore, many nearby residents and other frequent users of the park have complained that public art should not take priority over public access.

"I want to be open-minded; I'm an artist myself," said Johnson, 35. "But the fact that the park will be closed on the first day of spring - it just feels like they're taking something away. The project is supposed to be all about appreciating the beautiful park, but I don't appreciate a big, bold, tacky, radiator gold fence.

"To me, it's a little vain - and is more about trying to get attention and create a hype than it is about art," she added.

### Art versus access

City Council member William H. Cole IV, after fielding complaints from citizens yesterday, said he intended to review the city permits issued to the Maryland Institute College of Art and the Walters Art Museum, which sponsored the project. He also filed a request yesterday, asking the parks department to open one of the four squares to the public.

"I'm not against art," he said. "I think it's wonderful, but I don't understand how you can close off what is really the only green space within blocks - all four spots. That part is a bit troubling."

The exhibit, *Beyond the Compass, Beyond the Square*, was approved by the city Department of Transportation, city Department of Recreation and Parks and the City Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation.

Increasing public appreciation for the park and provoking discussion were the aims of Lee B. Freeman, the MICA student responsible for the fence. But he may be getting a more vitriolic response than he bargained for, as debate over the fence rages from the

street corners of Mount Vernon to the comments sections of local blogs.

One critic, or a group of them, made a more hands-on statement, sometime Tuesday night or early yesterday, applying red bumper stickers to the fence that say "Exclusionist." Freeman said the stickers were later removed.

And yesterday evening vandals took apart a section of the fence in the north square, but it was quickly repaired.

Freeman, originally from New York City, said he was surprised by the tone of some of the responses to the project, especially some of those on the Internet.

"I didn't think the threats of breaking in would be so strong," he said. "Some people are pretty supportive; some people are really upset. This has really forced people to choose one side of the fence."

As he spoke, phase two of the art project was under way - attiring five Mount Vernon Place statues in outfits. At noon yesterday, Rebecca Nagle, also a MICA student, stood atop a city truck's crane, dressing Revolutionary War General Lafayette in a brightly colored cloak.

#### Permit process

Though many residents say they were surprised to see the fence appear, Friends of Mount Vernon Place and the neighborhood association mailed their memberships notice of the exhibit, which they said would "provide viewers an opportunity to re-see and re-consider the space."

Both the Friends of Mount Vernon Place and the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association reviewed the project, and relayed their concerns to CHAP, said Paul Warren, vice president of the MVBA.

"There were questions we wanted to see resolved, and all those concerns were forwarded to CHAP to resolve," he said yesterday. "Instead, they just approved the permit." The Friends of Mount Vernon Place, despite repeated requests over three days, did not return calls.

From the start, Freeman said he wanted to encourage a conversation within the community. He posted his personal phone number on plaques around the fence, created a Web site with a message board. Freeman said he stood by the fence all day Monday to talk to pedestrians.

The bright gold fence stretches more than 3,000 feet, and took Freeman and his friends roughly nine 16-hour days to paint and prepare. He said he skipped class, stayed up and purchased hundreds of cans of gold spray paint to do the job, which plunged him into credit card debt.

#### Mixed response

As of midday yesterday, Freeman had received dozens of calls about the fence and several dozen comments on the site (goldchainlinkfence.com). The response has been mixed, with the most scathing remarks coming from the dog-walking community, he said.

"I'm not sure why they would take a public park and close it off to the public," said Tom Berger, co-owner of The Pretentious Pooch, a pet boutique on Cathedral Street. "No, I don't appreciate it more now that I can't go in it. That is very silly. I think it was appreciated on a daily basis by hundreds of people who are now standing outside saying, 'Uh, where did my public park go?'"

Lisa Faherty, a 30-year-old accountant who works for an investment management firm in Mount Vernon, said she was already fed up with all the construction going on in the neighborhood - and the art exhibit added to the mess.

"It's just an absolute disaster," she said. "People can't walk on Charles Street because the sidewalk is torn up. Now you have this in the middle of the park. I think people feel like they're really infringed upon."

"I understand it's an art exhibit, but I don't believe cutting off people's access to the park is going to serve any good," said Patrick Donnelly, a 27-year-old Peabody graduate student who cuts through the park several times a day on his way to class. Now he has to walk an extra block out of his way.

"If his goal is to make everyone realize how much they appreciate the park I think we could have done it a different way without alienating everyone who doesn't love and use this park every day," said Donnelly, who lives near the western square of Mount Vernon Place. Cordoning off one of the four squares that make up Mount Vernon Place would have made more sense, he said.

While some living in the area find the fence an eyesore, others aren't bothered and appreciate the message behind it - to appreciate what you have.

"It's kind of like the old Joni Mitchell song," said Dale Whitehead, a member of the Engineer's Club of Baltimore, across the street from the park. "You don't know what you've got till it's gone."

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