



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E

History of Grounds For Sculpture

Grounds For Sculpture was founded on the former site of the New Jersey State Fairgrounds, which for nearly a century had hosted agriculture awards, technological innovations, domestic arts, and entertaining acts, before ceasing operations in the 1970s. In late 1982, philanthropist and artist Seward Johnson moved the Johnson Atelier, his school for sculpture, to a building adjacent to the dormant Fairgrounds. As the Atelier began to produce a growing body of work for many artists, Johnson began to envision a place to exhibit sculpture in nature. It became essential to Johnson's vision that the new sculpture park would be an accessible place where all people could experience contemporary sculpture and beautiful grounds in a self-directed way, leading to greater appreciation and understanding of both art and nature.

An initial twelve acres of the Fairgrounds were acquired in 1984. The following year, Johnson instituted an architectural design competition for creating a sculpture park at the Fairgrounds, which resulted in Brian Carey of AC/BC Associates of New York City selected to be the project architect and landscape designer. Construction started in July 1989. The design incorporated the existing Motor Exhibits Building, Domestic Arts Building, and racetrack grandstand from the NJ State Fairgrounds and successfully relocated and renovated the "Rabbit" building, now known as the Museum building. The adapted structures are still in use today.

Coinciding with the 14th Annual Sculpture Conference in Philadelphia, Grounds For Sculpture opened to the public in 1992, with an inaugural exhibition featuring fifteen outdoor works by noted sculptors including George Segal, Beverly Pepper, and Mel Edwards. Grounds For Sculpture has since shown the work of more than 700 artists, including both established and emerging sculptors, through a combination of solo and group exhibitions.

In the following decades, additional land acquisitions allowed the sculpture park to expand to 42 acres and develop signature landscape design features including the Bamboo Observation Tower, the Water Garden, Red Maple Allée, Wisteria Pergola, and Lotus Pond Gazebo. It now provides a fertile home for thousands of trees, flowering shrubs, and diverse plants. The Meadow, a 7-acre wildflower garden, was the final area to open in 2014 with its inaugural exhibition, *Steve Tobin: Steel Roots*.

The campus continued to evolve to meet the needs of its growing visitors, collection, and program. In 1997, a redesign of the Domestic Arts Building offered new exhibition space, a café, gift shop, and administration space. Two years later, a full-service gourmet restaurant—Rat's—and an office complex were added. The Seward Johnson Center for the Arts was created in 2007 to expand GFS's educational spaces and capabilities and offer new visitor amenities. In 2012, space within the SJCA was developed to create the East Gallery for multipurpose use, including performing arts. Through subsequent renovations and modifications, the Seward Johnson Center for the Arts was awarded LEEDv4.1 certification in 2019.

Today, Ground For Sculpture's vibrant 42-acre campus features nearly 300 contemporary sculptures by renowned and emerging artists, hundreds of plant species, six indoor galleries, more than 20 artist studios, and Rat's restaurant, and is adjacent to world-class fabrication facilities at [The Seward Johnson Atelier](#) and [The Digital Atelier](#). It continues to welcome more than 250,000 visitors annually through a dynamic schedule of exhibitions and educational programs.