



Victor Castro, sculptor-in-residence at Madison library, builds art, community



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Want to help create a piece of public art while making a statement about sustainability? Victor Castro has a way to do it.

Castro, artist-in-residence at the Bubbler, the "makerspace" in the Madison Central Library, is collecting materials for an abstract sculpture to be installed in the lobby of the Meadowridge Branch Library on the southwest side when it is expanded later this

year.

And you may have the material he's using right in your kitchen cabinet.

You know those paper cartons that soup and soy milk come in? When there are empties at your house, rinse them out and flatten them. Then bring them over to your neighborhood Madison Public Library branch, or take them to the Bubbler downtown, where Castro himself might be on hand to take them.

But don't delay. Castro is on a mission to collect 2,403 of the used cartons by the end of February. (He has about 500 now.)

Castro will remove the cartons' plastic liners, turn them inside out to show the matte silver aluminum inside, then fashion them into a sculpture inspired by the drawings made by visitors that now cover a wall of the Bubbler.

It won't be the first sculpture that Castro, who comes to Madison from Mexico by way of Spain and Peru, has created from things some people might call trash. There were the plastic soda jugs fashioned into trees, and the one million multi-colored bottle caps poured into Plexiglas columns, photos of which Castro displays on a giant computer screen at the Bubbler.

It all started, he recalls, when as a starving student he started experimenting with empty cans from his meals. Soon, he says, friends were contributing cans they had emptied for him to work with, and he started his first network.

"It was an accident," Castro says of his movement toward materials used in everyday life.

The idea of creating a network to create art is central to Castro's work. He's been documenting the progress of the library project, under the name "USGathering," on

[Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) since around the time he arrived in Madison 18 months ago. And he's hoping publicity like articles in [Isthmus](#) and the [Wisconsin State Journal](#) will attract more attention to his collection efforts.

"USGathering is like my left hand. It's the system that organizes the materials, it's a huge community," he says. "When they see the sculpture, people will see it and say, 'Look that's my boxes!' 'Look there's my idea!'"

And his mission of creating community around a piece of art fits with his desire to reuse materials instead of using new ones, says Castro, who was awarded a [\\$10,000 grant](#) for the Meadowridge sculpture by the Madison Arts Commission.

"I can buy new materials, but for me, that's not sustainable. I challenge myself as an artist to be the most sustainable as possible in my work," he says.

And the occasion of banding together to create art from reused materials gives Castro an opportunity to teach U.S. communities about environmental issues like the value of recycling cardboard liquid boxes.

Students at several Madison Schools, including Toki Middle School, Orchard Ridge and Falk elementary schools, are collecting cartons for the sculpture that will be installed at their neighborhood library. Castro also visits schools to work with students on art projects, like building free-form sculptures from yogurt cartons held together with clothes pins.

"I want to inspire the little ones to dream big," Castro says, "because they are going to be asked to do something with the things that we reject. "

Alice Oakey, supervising librarian at the Meadowridge and Alicia Ashman branch libraries, says people are responding to the call for cartons.

"We have had a great outpouring of local support, and it just keeps building," Oakey says.

"Whenever Victor is around, the kids gravitate towards him and love working with him and learning about Tetra Paks (a popular brand name of container) and other things that you might throw away that you can make art out of," she says. "It's a fun project."

The Madison Common Council this week awarded a \$1.8 million contract for remodeling of the Meadowridge Branch Library and the Meadowood Neighborhood Center in the Meadowood Shopping Center at Raymond Road and South Whitney Way. The library and neighborhood center will be [expanded and share a common area](#) between them, the first partnership of its kind Madison, Oakey said.

"We'll collaborate with the neighborhood center to use the space to the best of both of our visions and missions," she says.

There is a lot of enthusiasm for the plan, including Castro's sculpture created with substantial help from the community for the community.

"People will drive down Raymond Road and say, 'Hey, what's that? Let's go and find out,'" says Oakey.

Pat Schneider



Pat Schneider

Pat Schneider joined The Capital Times in 1989 and has written on a wide variety of topics including neighborhoods, minority communities and the nonprofit sector.



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