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Seattle's new sculpture park celebrates art on a larger scale

Giant artworks fill a zigzagging, nine-acre swath, divided into four ecological areas

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If you drive out of downtown Seattle after an evening at the pubs and spy a 20-foot typewriter eraser looming out of the fog, don't blame the microbrew. It's just "Typewriter Eraser, Scale X," one of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's whimsical large-scale sculptures . . . and one of the signature pieces in the Seattle Art Museum's new \$85 million Olympic Sculpture Park, which opened Jan. 20 after seven years of planning. (The museum proper is closed, undergoing renovation and expansion before a May 5 grand reopening.)

A former Unocal Corp. storage site just north of downtown Seattle, the nine-acre sculpture park is positioned where yuppie Belltown meets Elliott Bay, anchoring the neighborhood just as Pike Place Market does to the south.

Viewed from the hill above (or from the observation deck of the Space Needle), the park's milelong path makes a Z-shaped slash down the hill as if sliced there by Zorro, taking pedestrians through four ecological "precincts" (valley, meadow, grove and shore), each with its own indigenous plants and saplings.

Enter at the Paccar Pavilion, an airy glass box on Western Avenue (and don't miss the Ellsworth Kelley wall sculpture at the entrance, which looks like a giant, rusted gingko leaf). Inside the pavilion is a cafe and gift counter, along with a whimsical wall mural and interactive, climbable sculptures by Pedro Reyes, which are pure kidbait.

The park's signature is Alexander Calder's 1971 stabile, "Eagle," a 39-foot reddish-orange steel abstract that suggests a bird taking flight over traffic-clogged Elliott Avenue. Also notable: Roxy Paine's "Split," a life-sized stainless steel tree that puts a shiny twist on the old man-vs.-nature dichotomy, and Richard Serra's "Wake," five serpentine curved-steel walls that glide through a gravel bed like the prows of ships . . . or a school of sharks.

And Teresita Fernandez's skyway, "Seattle Cloud Cover," is a gas, one of the few pieces that seem inevitable rather than grafted onto the landscape. Giant translucent slices of saturated color under glass take on ever-changing hues and shadows as the sun and clouds shift overhead.

A few things need rethinking. Two sculptures by Beverly Pepper are crammed on a walking path too dinky for their scale, while the only good view of Oldenburg's enormous eraser is from a moving car as you drive by on Elliott Avenue, which reduces it to little more than a roadside sign. (But you do get to explain the concept of "typewriter eraser" to anyone under 25.)

Five more sculptures will be installed at the park's seaward end later this spring, completing the sculpture garden. For now, art lovers will have to content themselves with an overhead view of Louise Bourgeois' fountain "Father and Son" (currently swathed in plastic) and Roy McMakin's "Love and Loss," which adds a glowing red, rotating ampersand to the backdrop of Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains.

That's a vista that can't be improved, only accentuated, which makes the ampersand a perfect symbol for the Olympic Sculpture Park itself.

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