Rhode Island School of Design and Prospect Park Alliance Partner on Cultural Study and Object Creation from Fallen Witness Tree

Student work reflects on immigrant experience in Brooklyn and beyond, to be displayed at Prospect Park from September 9-30, 2017

BROOKLYN, NY (August 10, 2017) – In timing with Prospect Park’s 150th Anniversary, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and Prospect Park Alliance present The Witness Tree Project, an exhibition of designed objects by RISD students created from a 150-year-old fallen elm tree in the Prospect Park Parade Ground. The public exhibition is on view at Lefferts Historic House from September 9-30, 2017, Thursdays through Sundays from 12-5 pm, with a closing reception on September 30 from 3-5 pm.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Descriptions of each piece and accompanying photos can be found here. To RSVP for the closing reception, please contact lgardner@prospectpark.org.

Witness Trees, as designated by the National Park Service (NPS), are long-standing trees that have "witnessed" key events in history. In a joint spring 2017 RISD furniture studio and history seminar called The Politics of Belonging: Race, Diversity and the Immigrant Experience in Brooklyn and Beyond taught by RISD Senior Critic of Furniture Design Dale Broholm and Associate Provost of Research|Global|Practice Daniel Cavicchi (previously Dean of Liberal Arts), student designers researched Prospect Park’s significance in American history, visited the site and built fully informed objects reflecting on what they learned, using the wood to create objects inspired by the rich cultural history surrounding the tree.

The Prospect Park elm tree dates back more than 150 years and stood in the Park’s Parade Ground. After RE-CO BKLYN, a Brooklyn-based lumber company, cut and dried the elm, students used the harvested wood to create objects ranging from a series of wooden kaleidoscopes through which viewers can observe the text of President Trump’s proposed travel ban to a wooden replica of the turntable used by seminal immigrant musician Grand Master Flash in the 1970s. The range of projects represents the wide range of immigrant experiences.

"We are so pleased to be collaborating with RISD during the 150th Anniversary celebration of Prospect Park to look at the fascinating history of not only the Park but Brooklyn at large," said Maria Carrasco, Vice President of Public Programs at Prospect Park Alliance, the non-profit organization that manages the Park in partnership with the City.
"The exhibit fits nicely with the array of programming we have presented as part of this milestone celebration, and what better venue than Lefferts Historic House, which itself has witnessed significant moments in Brooklyn's history."

"In its ninth year, The Witness Tree Project continues to offer students a unique and meaningful way to reflect on American history. RISD's ongoing educational collaboration with the NPS shows how history informs objects and provides a deeper understanding of culture," Broholm notes. "This year's studio focused on social identity and the immigrant experience and addressed issues that continue to be relevant today."

"At RISD," Cavicchi adds, "studying the liberal arts is integral to the process of becoming an accomplished artist or designer. Creativity depends on curiosity, empathy and communication—a desire to explore and share an understanding about the world in which we live. Research provides the maker with a deeper understanding of where ideas come from, and how to utilize them in the design process. These concepts are at the heart of The Witness Tree Project."

Prospect Park's history closely mirrors the history of Brooklyn, which was chartered in 1834 and by the 1860s became the nation's third largest city. This growth prompted civic leaders to spearhead the creation of Prospect Park as Brooklyn's flagship park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who also designed Central Park. In 1866, ground was broken and in 1867, the Park Commissioners held an "Opening Day" event that attracted thousands of visitors. Since that time, the Park has served as Brooklyn's Backyard, a haven for millions of community members from across the borough. Since 1987, the Park has operated through a private-public partnership between the City and Prospect Park Alliance, the non-profit organization that sustains, restores and advances the Park.

**About Lefferts Historic House**

Lefferts Historic House was built by a Dutch family in the 18th-century farming village of Flatbush (now known as Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn), and was moved to Prospect Park in 1918. It features a working garden, historic artifacts, period rooms and exhibits. Visitors are encouraged to play with traditional tools, toys and games, and engage in historic activities such as candle making, sewing and butter churning. Prospect Park Alliance and the Historic House Trust of New York City jointly operate and preserve this important piece of New York City’s past. [For more information, visit prospectpark.org/Lefferts](prospectionpark.org/Lefferts).

**About Prospect Park Alliance**

Prospect Park Alliance is the non-profit organization that sustains, restores and advances Prospect Park, "Brooklyn's Backyard," in partnership with the City. The Alliance was founded in 1987 to help restore the Park after a long period of deterioration and decline. Today, the Alliance provides a majority of the staff and resources that keep the Park green and vibrant for the diverse communities that call Brooklyn home. The Alliance cares for the woodlands and natural areas, restores the Park's buildings and landscapes, creates innovative Park destinations, and provides volunteer, education and recreation programs. Prospect Park is one of Brooklyn's most treasured destinations with more than 10 million visits each year. [Learn more at www.prospectpark.org.](www.prospectpark.org)

**About Rhode Island School of Design**

Known as the leading college of art and design in the US, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) is ranked #1 in Business Insider's survey of The World’s 25 Best Design Schools. Approximately 2,450 students from around the world are enrolled in full-time bachelor’s or master's degree programs in a choice of 19 majors. Students value RISD’s
accomplished faculty of artists and designers, the breadth of its specialized facilities and its hands-on approach to studio-based learning. Required courses in the liberal arts enrich the studio experience, equipping graduates to make meaningful contributions to their communities. Through their creative thinking and problem solving in a broad range of fields, RISD’s 26,000 alumni exemplify the vital role artists and designers play in fueling global innovation. Founded in 1877, RISD (pronounced “RIZ-dee”) and the RISD Museum help make Providence, RI among the most culturally active and creative cities in the region. For more information, visit risd.edu and our.risd.edu.

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