

## The center of attention // Olympic cauldron is work of Minnesota artist: [METRO Edition]

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Tonight, the work of Minnesota artist Siah Armajani will be at the center of the world's television screens and at the crescendo of the Olympic Opening Ceremonies.

Alternately called quirky, splendid, clunky and visual poetry, the Olympic Cauldron, Tower and Bridge will be the structural focus of the Atlanta Olympics' ritualistic blast-off.

"When it lights, think of me," Armajani said, punctuating his suggestion with a laugh.

It was a rare moment of self-consumption for the 57-year-old Iranian-born sculptor, who is known around the world for his massive pieces of public art but has lived almost anonymously in St. Paul for 36 years and works in a downtown Minneapolis studio.

He playfully but firmly shuns publicity, refusing to be photographed, refusing to be interviewed in person. Armajani insists his art is somehow detached from him.

"This art has nothing to do with me, really nothing," said Armajani, who also designed the Irene Whitney Hixon Bridge, which connects Loring Park to the Walker Art Center in downtown Minneapolis. "I did it and that's it. I am a public artist, but I am not at ease sharing my private life."

Selected in a national competition, Armajani designed the 21-foot-high red steel cauldron that will house the flame, and the 116-foot-high Erector-Set-like tower upon which the cauldron rests. He also conceived the 200-foot-long steel bridge, with the Olympic rings on its sides, that connects the flame to the Olympic Stadium.

The work of art was fabricated and constructed at American Structural Metals in Hugo, Minn.

Midway up the tower, which has 140 fire-escape-like steps, is a green, wooden house. That, said Armajani, "represents Atlanta's hospitality and warmth, and gathers people and gives them peace." The steps will be dramatically ascended by the final torch-bearer, who has yet to be identified.

The spiral-like cauldron, which seems to be waving in the wind, is trimmed in blue, rising to the height of the Statue of Liberty. Around midnight, after athletes from 197 nations march into the Olympic Stadium, the flame's ignition will mark the start of the Centennial Olympic Games.

"It has to do more with the civiness than the individuality of people," said Armajani, who will be in the Olympic Stadium to witness the lighting. "It has nothing to do with my personal angst or my personal anxiety. It is to bring about some sort of pleasure and happiness for the folks."

Since the cauldron was placed atop the tower on May 31, it has received mixed reviews. The **New York Times** called the cauldron "the Olympic thimble." During the U.S. Olympic track and field trials, a collection of sports writers referred to the cauldron as "a giant french fry container."

But just last week, **Washington Post** architecture critic Benjamin Forgey praised the piece.

"The bridge can be seen as a symbolic connection to the past in a city that is obsessed with the future," Forgey wrote. "The more obvious symbolism, of course, has to do with the event being commemorated: Just as the tower and cauldron stand as signals of the highest athletic aspirations, so does the bridge serve as a reminder of the Olympic ideal of bringing people and places together."

Of the irreverent critiques, Armajani sighed and said, "It is a free country."

For Armajani, who moved to the U.S. in 1960 to attend **Macalester College** and who became a citizen in 1967, being named the cauldron's artist was, he said, "My final baptism into American culture."