

Kurt Flecksing's ideas about public space taste like S'mores

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• Kurt Flecksing

- Kurt Flecksing is ready to start up the s'mores cart again.

The ingredients for s'mores are simple enough: marshmallows blackening in the fire, chocolate oozing between a pair of hastily broken graham crackers, a deep and abiding commitment to changing the way we use and understand public spaces.

Designer Kurt Flecksing figures that the first two aren't a tough sell. (And he has them covered; more on that in a minute.) It's the third that's really driving his S'mores, the rebuilt food cart that he introduces from 7 to 11 p.m. Thursday, June 21, at 429 Walnut.

"There's something charming about s'mores," Flecksing says. "There's this fun element that draws people in for a conversation. Once there, I'm hoping they'll start to look more at their surroundings."

The cart began as a collaboration between Flecksing and Sean Starowitz, one of the co-founders of Bread KC. The two met as undergraduates at the Kansas City Art Institute and hatched the idea of creating a micro-funding revenue source for public art. The S'mores Project received a Rocket Grant in 2010 from the Charlotte Street Foundation, and in February of that year, its first s'mores were cooked over an open flame in front of the Urban Culture Project's Paragraph Gallery.

"The initial idea for the S'mores Cart came from the current climate of how the creative world is being financed," Flecksing says. "There are all these different platforms, like Kickstarter. And in the arts, it's always been about giving to the creative process, about donating to the creative process. But with the S'mores Cart, you actually interact and, through that interaction, contribute to the public conversation. You're helping to improve the public space while contributing to it." But for Flecksing, it was not only about reaching the public but also about creating a viable business that could stand as a physical reminder of the organizations or individuals that it helped support. To that end, Flecksing wants to partner with area artists - a S'mores mug from a local ceramist is one of the products in development - and have signage around the cart that reminds people to connect with the space they're inhabiting and the producers of the goods they're buying.

"The arts are in this amazing bubble where artists can experiment, but I think the 21st century is going to be about taking art out in the world," Flecksing says. Over the past two years, his focus has shifted from how art can transform or define public spaces into looking at functional design. And the first item that needed his attention was the cart itself. He worked with the health department to design a propane burner - it heats lava rocks in a pan attached to the front of his cart - in order to secure a vending license. And now that the cart is ready, Flecksing says he intends to use the initial proceeds to fund projects from artists, urban planners, architects or urban designers.

"This will be a transparent process," he says. "I'll notify the public that I have this much money for this round of funding, establish a deadline, and let it know exactly what kind of work the money will support."

As for the campfire treat itself, Flecksing says his recipes also are evolving. The "All-American," made with Nabisco graham crackers, Hershey's chocolate and bagged marshmallows, is at the center of his menu, but he also plans at least one premium s'more at a time. Potential partners include Christopher Elbow for chocolate, pastry chef Natasha Goellner of Natasha's Mulberry & Mott for marshmallows, and the Soho Bakery for graham crackers.

Flecksing is frank about his own chef abilities. "S'more's are easy - there's a reason I picked them," he says.

So he plans to rely on the public for recipe ideas as part of the ongoing conversation. Flecksing envisions a time when S'mores might provide his sole income and also act as a micro-grant generator for others. For now, he says, freelance design contracts, teaching workshops on recycled materials at elementary schools, and house painting are what keep his cart in marshmallows. He has invested about \$4,000 of his own money in the project.

"This is a way to create revenue for creative production in our city, and it's not just about the urban arts core," he says. "I'd cook s'mores in a NASCAR parking lot, if they'd let me, because I just want people to have conversations about public spaces."

And why not? After all, it's in that moment between wiping marshmallow off your chin and licking chocolate from your fingers when that other campfire tradition gets under way: telling stories.

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