

# Light art flickers to life downtown



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*(Photo: Jim Campbell/Special to the Register)*

We probably won't feel it, but at 10:49 p.m. Monday we'll hit the winter solstice.

It's the tipping point when the North Pole tilts the farthest away from the sun, at 23.5 degrees, marking the Northern Hemisphere's official plunge into winter and the longest night of the year.

But there is a bright spot in the darkness.

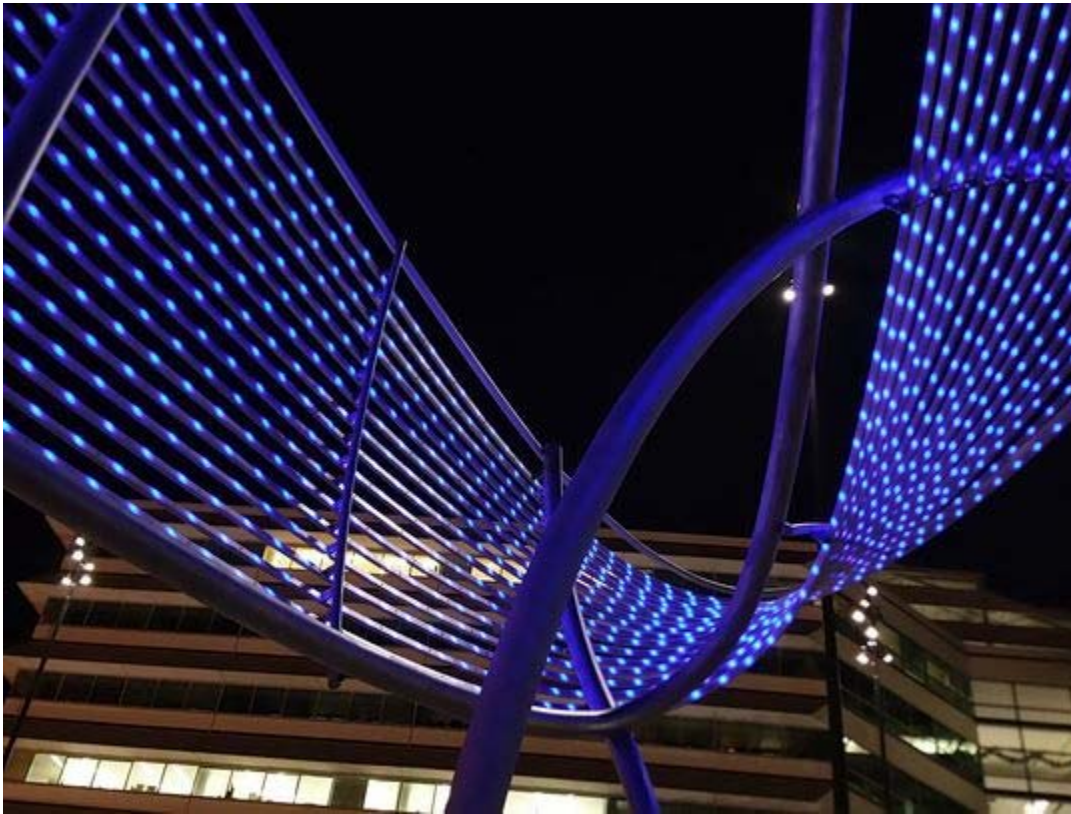
The tiny lights that spangle the new sculpture at Cowles Commons flickered over the last few weeks, signaling the final steps of a project almost a decade in the making. After a few more tests, the \$1.5 million sculpture with more than 8,000 LEDs will shimmer every night, probably starting around Jan. 10.

San Francisco artist Jim Campbell's "Swirl," as he calls it, will be the latest and most complex addition to downtown's illuminated nightscape, joining Olafur Eliasson's [rainbow glass ring](https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ_AUIBygC#tbm=isch&q=Olafur+Eilasson+Pappajohn+Sculpture+Park) ([https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj\\_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ\\_AUIBygC#tbm=isch&q=Olafur+Eilasson+Pappajohn+Sculpture+Park](https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ_AUIBygC#tbm=isch&q=Olafur+Eilasson+Pappajohn+Sculpture+Park)) in the Pappajohn Sculpture Park, the [colored stripes](https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ_AUIBygC#tbm=isch&q=Financial+Center+Des+Moines) ([https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj\\_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ\\_AUIBygC#tbm=isch&q=Financial+Center+Des+Moines](https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ_AUIBygC#tbm=isch&q=Financial+Center+Des+Moines)) of the Financial Center, the [blue lights](https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ_AUIBygC#tbm=isch&q=Martin+Luther+King+Jr.+Bridge+Des+Moines) ([https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj\\_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ\\_AUIBygC#tbm=isch&q=Martin+Luther+King+Jr.+Bridge+Des+Moines](https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ_AUIBygC#tbm=isch&q=Martin+Luther+King+Jr.+Bridge+Des+Moines)) on the Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway Bridge over the Des Moines River, and a [quartet of neon messages](/story/entertainment/arts/arts-in-iowa/2015/12/18/light-art-livens-up-300mlk/77548074/) (</story/entertainment/arts/arts-in-iowa/2015/12/18/light-art-livens-up-300mlk/77548074/>) in the old brown-brick castle now called 300MLK.

All of these will keep shining even after the holiday lights are unplugged and the hidden-in-plain-sight silhouette of an [Absolut Vodka bottle on the EMC Insurance Building](https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ_AUIBygC) ([https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj\\_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ\\_AUIBygC](https://www.google.com/search?q=EMC+Building+Absolut&espv=2&biw=1163&bih=604&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj_3MzQt-bJAhVMOiYKHV2TD9IQ_AUIBygC)) switches from red and green back to white.

When "Swirl" is finished, white LEDs will chase each other around the outside of 18 oblong loops, which are spooled around nine 30-foot posts. Colored lights softened by translucent plastic covers will circulate inside of the loops.

All together, the lights will transmit a low-resolution video of runners from this fall's IMT Des Moines Marathon, circling laps around the sculpture's form.



San Francisco artist Jim Campbell's team conducted a test run of the lights on "Swirl" at Cowles Commons earlier this month. *(Photo: Jim Campbell/Special to the Register)*

Campbell said he may temporarily switch the video to display the word "vote" during the Iowa caucuses, and he has other ideas down the road.

No matter what they are, however, the images will be apparent only from a distance. Up close, they'll blur into an amorphous glow. And that should keep viewers interested, Campbell said, almost like an Impressionist painting.

"You don't get sick of it because you never figure it out," he told a group of Iowa State University design students during a November trip to Ames. "You won't even notice it's a (video) loop because it's so abstract."



[DES MOINES REGISTER](#)



Light art livens up 300MLK

(<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/entertainment/arts/arts-in-iowa/2015/12/18/light-art-livens-up-300mlk/77548074/>)

## A 'brilliant' artist

Campbell describes himself as an artist rather than a sculptor because he works with light and images. But he wanted the Cowles Commons project to look as cool during the day as it does at night.

That's why the curving steel form is "such a hard shape to grasp even when you're walking around it," he said. It functions as both a sculpture and a video screen, "Venetian blinded" into strips.



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Earlier working titles for the project included "Cloud" and "Nest," but Campbell ultimately chose "Swirl" because it suggests both the steel form and the images that flit around it. The word "is both a verb and a noun so it seemed to fit," he explained, "and when you see the imagery, hopefully it will make sense."

Artist Jim Campbell worked on "Swirl" earlier this month. (Photo: Michael Morain/The Register)

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Eventually, the small trees that grow near it will also grow slightly into it. They'll mingle their branches with the steel form in a way Campbell hopes will further integrate the sculpture to its site.

It's just what city leaders had wanted.

"It will be a magnet to draw people to the center of the city," Des Moines Art Center Director Jeff Fleming said.

Or maybe: They'll flock to it like moths to a light bulb.

Fleming was the one who brought up Campbell's name a decade ago when Des Moines Performing Arts leaders started brainstorming ideas to turn then-shabby Nollen Plaza into Cowles Commons. Fleming had curated some of the artist's work 20 or 25 years ago, when Fleming worked at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C.

"He was just brilliant," Fleming said. "I've followed him ever since."



**Jim Campbell's "Eternal Recurrence" lit up Hong Kong's International Commerce Center in 2014.** (Photo: Jim Campbell Studio/Special to the Register)

Campbell studied math and electrical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and first experimented with video art in the 1980s. He set up cameras and monitors in art galleries so visitors could watch themselves on screen, back when that was still a newfangled thing.

In the '90s he shifted his focus to electronic sculpture and then LED matrix works that examined the nature of motion and optics. More recently, he installed a 750-foot strip of lights to transmit a low-resolution video of swimmers, slowly breast-stroking, on the ceiling of the San Diego airport. He sent another swimmer paddling up and down a 108-story skyscraper in Hong Kong.

## The idea's evolution

Here in Des Moines, when he joined the early discussions about Cowles Commons, input from the public encouraged planners to include a bathroom facility.

So Campbell proposed something of a glorified outhouse, a sleek cube-shaped building completely covered in video screens.

"I don't think anybody really liked the idea but me," he said.

His next proposal kept the video screens but turned the cube into a miniature barn — a tribute, he said, to Iowa's agricultural roots.

"So then people hated it for *two* reasons," he said.

Since donors couldn't get excited about a glowing barn-shaped bathroom in the middle of downtown, the plans sat on the shelf until the recession hit, in 2008, stalling [the entire Cowles Commons renovation \(/story/news/2015/06/11/cowles-commons-des-moines-city-square/71099574/\)](/story/news/2015/06/11/cowles-commons-des-moines-city-square/71099574/) for the next several years.

When the economy perked up, Campbell jumped back in with three new proposals that had nothing to do with a bathroom. One was a row of antique lamp posts that glowed everywhere *except* where the traditional light bulb is. Another was a 200-foot covered walkway with hundreds of bare light bulbs hanging from its canopy.

The third proposal involved a grid of lights wrapped around a Mobius strip, and it was this one that eventually morphed its way into reality. Campbell redesigned its pillars to make them curve, like elephant tusks, to provide more visual interest, and a team of structural engineers made sure they could carry the weight of the oval loops. They called for Duplex stainless steel, which is twice as strong as regular stainless steel, to make it work.

Most of the assembly took place in October, when a work crew climbed into a few hydraulic lifts and a crane to plant the posts in the ground and then hang the loops onto them. Think of a carnival ring toss, only bigger. And slower. And much, much more careful.

Local volunteers plugged the lights into loops while they were still on the ground, around Thanksgiving, and Campbell's studio team tinkered with the wiring.



San Francisco artist Jim Campbell's team conducted a test run of the lights on "Swirl" at Cowles Commons earlier this month. *(Photo: Jim Campbell/Special to the Register)*

In one section, "there were about 4,000 lights and only one was out," Campbell said. (Anyone who has ever strung up Christmas lights would agree with his assessment: "That was pretty good.")

## Flipping the switch

After workmen welded all the puzzle pieces into place, Campbell turned on all the lights one recent afternoon. They gradually showed up, brighter and brighter, as the sun went down — so much that he turned them down to 20 percent of their full power.



**Artist Jim Campbell stood by a brick placeholder for a light he plans to install, as a signature, under his "Swirl" sculpture at Cowles Commons. It will be a single light embedded in the bricks and synchronized to the lights of the sculpture, as if it had fallen to the ground. (Photo: Michael Morain/The Register)**

"I was very excited when I saw it lit up," he said, "and to be honest, I don't always say that."

Des Moines Performing Arts COO Laura Sweet, who has overseen the whole Cowles Commons renovation, expects to get a little emotional when the sculpture lights up next month, just as she did when the new fountain sprang to life this summer.

"With each of the milestones," she said, "I just think about the difference this is going to make for downtown Des Moines."

She will soon be able to control the sculpture's lights with her iPhone, flipping them on or off for special events, or swapping in new videos as Campbell develops them.

"The block really combines the city's commitment to technology and the future, which is demonstrated in Jim's piece," she said, "along with a strong connection to Des Moines' history and the role it plays in the region, with the Peace Rock and the Claes Oldenburg umbrella."

But more than that, she said, the commons has a sense of community spirit.

"Someone seeing it for the first time, even if they don't understand all the details, they'd know the broad brushstrokes of the block have to do with energy," she said.

Art Center director Fleming said that if he was an out-of-towner who stumbled onto the block for the first time, he'd be impressed, too.

He said, "I'd think this is the coolest city on the planet."

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## In his own words

Artist Jim Campbell plans to talk about his work, including "Swirl," at a public lecture organized by Des Moines Performing Arts and the Des Moines Art Center. It is tentatively set for March 13.

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