

# Chicago Tribune

## Calatrava sculpture: It's no Flamingo but it might brighten riverfront

*Blair Kamin Thurs., May 10, 2018*



Architect Santiago Calatrava unveils a design for a riverfront sculpture at 444 W. Lake Street in front of the River Point office building in Chicago on May 7, 2018. Joining Calatrava are Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Larry Levy, with Levy Family Partners. (Jose M. Osorio/Chicago Tribune)

Given Chicago's impressive array of public art, from Alexander Calder's lyrical Flamingo in Federal Center Plaza to Anish Kapoor's bean-shaped, brilliantly reflective Cloud Gate in Millennium Park, it's natural to ask: Why is an architect — specifically, Santiago Calatrava, designer of the failed Chicago Spire — crashing this party?

But the Spanish-born, Zurich-based Calatrava, who on Monday unveiled his design for a spiraling red sculpture along the Chicago River, is hardly an artistic novice. He paints and sculpts, and his sculpture has been exhibited in museums and public places, like the median of New York's Park Avenue, where seven of his pieces — red, black and silver works of painted aluminum — were displayed in 2015.

To a fault, perhaps, Calatrava is as much an artist as an architect and an engineer, designing buildings, bridges and other infrastructure that sometimes reach beyond the structurally rational to the visually and economically excessive. His budget-busting, \$4 billion World Trade Center transit hub in lower Manhattan, which was supposed to resemble a bird but looks more like a stegosaurus, is the most notorious example.

By comparison, Calatrava's planned Chicago sculpture, which currently carries the name "S25" and is to be located in the outdoor plaza of the River Point office building at 444 W. Lake St., seems rather modest. At just under 30 feet

(Calatrava misspoke Monday when he said it would be 15 meters, or 49 feet, tall), the piece would be a mere speck compared with the Spire, a planned 2,000-foot condo tower that wound up being nothing more than a circular foundation hole.

The cost, said to be in the millions of dollars, will be borne by the building's owners — Hines, Ivanhoe Cambridge and Levy Family Partners. They're no fools. The piece will be built for a fixed price.

Calatrava himself politely paid homage to the legacy that artists like Calder, Joan Miro and Pablo Picasso have left in Chicago. "You are the city that introduced public art," he said at a Monday news conference, making the obligatory reference to the pioneering role Chicago played in the 1960s and 1970s, when public officials and private patrons placed provocative works of contemporary art along streets and in parks and plazas.

Yet in light of the prominent place that the Calatrava sculpture will occupy at the confluence of the Chicago River's north and south branches, the bar for S25 is set intimidatingly high. Flanked by new skyscrapers and such old favorites as 333 W. Wacker, plus the west end of the splendid downtown riverwalk, the confluence is shaping up to be a major civic space — the early 21st-century equivalent of the district formed by the Beaux Arts Michigan Avenue Bridge and the great 1920s towers around it.

So the quality of this sculpture matters — a lot. It's not enough that it's a brand-name piece designed by a celebrated artist-architect. It's important to ask whether this is a site-specific work of art, tailored to its place, or one of those could-be-anywhere baubles that adorn suburban office parks.

To be made of aluminum, with an inner frame of steel that will prevent it from being knocked over by the wind, the Calatrava sculpture is described in a news release as "an outward-reaching spiral constructed of overlapping leaflike elements descending in scale from very large at the sculpture's base to very small at the outer reaches of the sculpture's spiral form." That spiraling geometry nods to River Point's curves, especially the parabolic arch that defines the office tower's base and is repeated in the plaza's paving.

Score one for site-specificity.

Another plus is the anticipated contrast between the sculpture's visual complexity and bright red color and River Point's comparatively simple, silver-blue walls. Here, Calatrava owes an obvious debt to Calder's Flamingo, whose curves, color (a vermilion called "Calder Red") and whimsy play winningly against the Federal Center's right-angled, matte-black sobriety. And like the Flamingo, which is not a solid mass but penetrable so pedestrians can walk through it, Calatrava's piece will invite interaction. You can imagine people sunning themselves on its curving base. Or ignoring "No Skateboarding" signs.

But the settings are very different. The Flamingo sits in a tightly framed urban plaza, which makes for a lively tension between art and architecture. In contrast, the Calatrava sculpture will sit on the edge of a vast open space dominated by the river and sky. Will it be able to command that expanse? Perhaps it will, partly because its plaza occupies a raised platform above working railroad tracks. In addition, the canted, reflective glass within River Point's parabolic arch can be expected to magnify the sculpture's presence. That glass produces striking reflections of the river's waters and passing boats. It's easy to imagine it showing off Calatrava's piece in similarly dramatic fashion.

The ultimate question, though, is less about this mirror game than the artistic quality of the object it reflects.

Here again, the Flamingo sets a high standard. The piece looks stable because it stands on legs yet it has a soaring quality, not only because it rises to a height of 53 feet but also because its two curving legs, which are remarkably thin and graceful, frame entrancing voids and views beneath them. In contrast, Calatrava's piece seems to balance tenuously, like an oversized version of a red, curled-up leaf that was blown onto a swath of grass. The Flamingo's elegant abstraction has the virtue of subtly suggesting its namesake creature. At this stage, Calatrava's design seems more literal and less graceful. But it is not without promise.

We'll know the outcome when the sculpture takes its place along the river next summer.