

## CASSILLY'S CITY - WITH A GLEAM IN HIS EYE AND NO FEAR IN HIS HEART, OUR TOWN'S RESIDENT QUIXOTIC ARTIST OPENS A MUSEUM OF ART AND WHIMSY

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WHAT a place.

And what a cast. At times, some of the 50 or so workers who built it looked like leftovers from Woodstock.

"A mecca for people on the fringes," says Robert J. Cassilly, who adds: "Some of the most talented people are misfits."

Cassilly is the guy in the photograph balancing on one leg on a water tower, 10 floors and one 60-foot-high tank above North 15th Street and Lucas Avenue. In all, Cassilly is 205 feet above the streets, not counting his 6-foot-3 frame.

If this looks scary, it was.

But it's also appropriate. It could serve as a logo for the area's newest entertainment attraction - Gail and Bob Cassilly's wonderfully eclectic and quixotic City Museum, with the slogan - "Explore the Unexpected," or where art and adventure come together. And it sure is all of that.

There's no simple or neat explanation for what's available at the City Museum, which opens to the public next Saturday. The Cassillys say it will continue to evolve and change and grow, organically, as Cassilly likes to say, which is pretty much the way he does things.

Some attractions, such as the world's largest traveling dinosaur exhibit, will be on display for just six months, before moving on. The 66 specimens are from the Paleontological Institute of the Russian Academy of Science in Moscow, including the bones of Tyrannosaurus rex.

When we suggested that Cassilly's picture on the water tower would make a museum logo, his partner, Timothy Tucker, former Mayor Raymond R. Tucker's grandson, laughed. "It's the honest to goodness truth," said Tucker. "That's the epitome of Bob Cassilly; the man knows no fear."

Tucker added: "He's done more for the city singlehandedly than any agency." This was said by a man who worked for the city's Land Clearance Authority and other government agencies.

Knowing no fear would include the normal anxiety that comes from opening a museum in a downtown area that has seen better days. In 1993, the Cassillys bought the two 10-story buildings - 1501-09 Washington Avenue and 701 North 15th Street - of what was once the world's largest shoe works. They paid \$525,000 to Washington University, using money they got when their old building at 4512 Shaw Boulevard, a onetime Polar Ice structure, was razed to make way for the Missouri Botanical Garden's new research complex.

Moving into the old International Shoe Co. buildings - now called the International Arts Complex - was such a bold business decision that earlier this year the Wall Street Journal did a front-page story on Cassilly, under the headline: "A Renovator Offers One Possible Remedy For St. Louis Blues."

The Journal mentioned that old urban bugaboo - fear of crime. It quoted a woman from St. Charles, Adrienne Fairbanks, who suggested well-lighted parking lots (there's nearby parking for 800 vehicles) as a security measure, and added that some of her neighbors wouldn't go downtown for any reason anyway.

To which Cassilly - in typical fashion - replied: "We'll get people who aren't afraid."

Adds Gail Cassilly, "All that woman has to do is come down here on a Saturday night, when there can be as many as 800 people on two floors of Windows on Washington. We have more street lighting going up, outdoor and indoor security. People don't have reason to be afraid to come here."

The office building on Washington, built in 1909, was designed by Theodore Link, the architect who created Union Station. Despite its magnificent exterior, the Cassillys' building was in such bad shape that the front doors were rusted shut, mostly because of urine from homeless people. And a sprinkler system malfunction flooded a floor, creating a mushroom farm.

But the 1909 structure has been rehabbed into impressive offices, studio space and the 10th-floor Windows on Washington, with a panoramic view of downtown. The International Building has been a success. With some 50 tenants, it brings in about \$1.1 million a year in rent.

Windows on Washington was the site of a recent fund-raising luncheon for President Bill Clinton. That presidential visit caused the city to fix the construction holes in the street in front of the building. "Then the utilities tore it up again," said Cassilly.

The even larger shoe warehouse building to the north - a place where playwright Tennessee Williams once worked - was built in 1930. In all, it has 16 acres of floor space. So far, what's there are three massive floors of mostly recycled art work and Bob Cassilly sculpture pieces.

The treasures include concrete snakes and salamanders; tunnels; secret passageways; waterfalls; a 35,000-gallon fish tank; a small railroad; an enchanted forest (with the sycamore wood imported from the Cassillys' sheep farm at Dittmer, in Jefferson County); a walk-through bowhead whale; and, at the entrance, the recently installed praying mantis.

Weighing about 3,000 pounds, and standing 24 feet tall, the cold-cast bronze creature was done by the Cassilly sculpture firm and moved from its previous home at the Missouri Botanical Garden.

"Critters," Gail Cassilly calls them, suggesting that she never knows where another one will pop up. Or when her husband will move in another pile of ruins from another demolished building. "Bob can't help making an animal out of everything he sees," she said.

This is an attraction that grows with planning by whimsy. "My revenge against architects," said Bob Cassilly. "Materials and people defined the building.

"If you're living in a ruin, if you can't fight it, join it," he says, jumping around on huge, rusty pieces from the old railroad viaduct. It was recently dismantled from its perch above Leonor K. Sullivan Boulevard, hard by the levee. Cassilly appropriated big chunks of it and laughs when he says that Tom Purcell, president of Laclede's Landing Redevelopment Corp., thought it frightened tourists.

What Cassilly will do with this stuff is anyone's guess. But you can bet it'll come back to life in some form.

"We need it like a hole in the head," said Gail Cassilly, slowly shaking her head, a not infrequent gesture.

On the third floor, just off the winding staircase - the steps are from old City Hospital - is a section where the floors are littered with machine parts and gears, lathes and I-beams. These are greasy trinkets for an assortment of Rube Goldberg-like gadgets that Cassilly is installing for his Mechanical Wonder World.

The crowning glory is the large generator from a 100-foot-high power-generating windmill built by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the Department of Energy during the Carter administration. It was installed on a little island off Puerto Rico and then dismantled in 1983. The blades, which were being stored on the island, were blown away by Hurricane Hugo in 1989.

Cassilly and friend Dean Pruitt, who salvaged the windmill generator, are rebuilding it as the centerpiece of the Mechanical Wonder World. Pruitt and Cassilly met one night scavaging pieces from a razed building.

When the generator is completed, rigged to I-beams - an auxiliary shaft connected to a step-down gearbox - all of this will be linked to a bicycle mechanism that will enable children to hoist a 26,000-pound block of granite up three floors. Eventually, Pruitt and Cassilly plan for the settling granite to run a 120-foot clock escapement from the 1904 World's Fair.

And what if the granite block falls on a child? Cassilly shrugged and said: "Then the parents will own the building, and I'll be free."

Cassilly's death masks of old St. Louis buildings certainly show that these remnants do have a second life. There are fascinating bits and big pieces of the Western Union building, Southtown Famous-Barr, downtown's St. Louis Title Co. and midtown's Beaumont Medical Building.

There are the American Gothic remains of an 1870s farmhouse from Whitehall, Ill., demolished to make way for a Quik Trip. It's been reassembled into a white-frame clapboard structure, with windows reminiscent of those in "American Gothic," the famous Grant Wood painting.

Standing near the museum entrance, serving as a two-story ticket office, are parts of the Persian motif from the St. Louis Title Co. facade. It was built in 1897 and situated at 804 Chestnut Street until it was demolished for the Gateway Mall.

On the third floor, where the Architectural Museum is situated, there's an amazing inventory of parts from old buildings. Most of it's local, but it includes a large piece of the ornate facade of the Broadway Strand Theater in Chicago.

The remains have been stored by Landmarks Association of St. Louis, some pieces for more than a decade. They've been reassembled into fanciful new shapes, under the watch of Bruce Gerrie, the man who knows where and what all the parts are.

Most of this is St. Louis as it used to be - before the Gateway Mall wiped out some of the true architectural gems of downtown. Cassilly, a world-class scavenger, saved many of the ornamental parts, pieces of exterior and interior granite and marble.

He loved doing this surreptitiously, often at night, before haulers took the stuff off to landfills. He got the lion heads from the International Fur Exchange Building, still standing at Fourth and Market streets, but in a state of demolition limbo. "They want 'em back," he said, with a big grin.

But whenever anyone says he can have something from a demolished building, it takes some of the fun out of it; he'd rather swipe it. But as his staff says, "Bob loves the word free."

And that free even includes the curving walls made from 2,200 stainless-steel rodent cages, acquired from a dealer who got them from the Washington University medical school. Originally, they were steam-table trays.

Then there's what will be the world's tallest climbing wall. It's a 10-story, 144-foot iron chute, made in the shape of a giant corkscrew. It was used for dropping cases of shoes from one floor to another.

Cassilly, of course - with the creative soul of a little kid - tried riding down the shoe chute, a spiraling, straight-down drop. It was like falling in a spinning motion, but he managed to stop in time.

"The illusion of danger is essential for any kind of adventure," he says, adding, with a mischievous smile: "We're under the theory that small cuts and bruises are like vaccinations."

Nearby, two girls, Chelsea Wheeler, 9, and Katrina Cook, 10, daughters of workers, climbed around the unfinished caves and tunnels, situated adjacent to the shoe chute. Cassilly figured they were a good pre-opening focus group.

However, the world's highest climbing wall won't be ready when the museum opens. It may exist as part of the future extension of the cave system, Gail Cassilly said. But not for eight months or a year, maybe longer, she said, expressing some exasperation with her husband for showing it off.

But on the third floor, finishing touches were under way for Jessica Hen toff and Michael Killian's everydaycircus, and Cassilly soulmate Bill Christman's Museum of Mirth, Mystery and Mayhem. The circus will offer live entertainment, rides, concessions and carnival games. It is situated just east of Christman's mirth and madness museum, which promises all the charm of an old-fashioned, and cheesy, carnival midway.

Like most of the exhibits at the City Museum, Christman's carnival will always be in a state of flux, fueled by the same whimsy that drives Cassilly.

One month, it may be a collection of shrunken heads. The next, a hundred of the oddest beer openers in the world. There's even a dragon from the bandstand of the old Forest Park Highlands amusement park.

Christman and Cassilly are two artists out of the same pod.

So up there, wobbling around on the roof of what was once the shoe warehouse, is Cassilly. From the camera angle you can't see the gleam in his eyes. But there's a gleam, almost radioactive, as his creative brain is usually churning like a critter in a squirrel cage.

Case in point. On his way to the rooftop, standing at the midpoint of the fifth-level glass-block skyway, one of nine skyways linking the two 10-story buildings, Cassilly pauses and looks west.

"At least you know you're not in Chesterfield," he says, glancing at the gritty urban vista of Lucas Avenue: loft buildings, warehouses, wrought-iron fire escapes and brick alleyways.

He has plans for the skyways, which in the late afternoon offer a spectacular light show as the sun sets in the west. Cassilly wants a neon light show for the walkways, illuminating the night, showing the way to the City Museum.

Up here, you can catch a glimpse of Cassilly's serpentine parking-lot fence, and more of his "treasures" - huge objects from demolished structures. It is something of a civic boneyard. Besides the giant beams from the 19th-century railroad viaduct, there's a row of Corinthian columns, saved from what was the old Stix School.

Five people are at the core of all this. First are sculptors Bob and Gail Soliwoda Cassilly, of Cassilly & Cassilly, a partnership specializing in sculptures and restoration. Both have post-graduate degrees in fine arts from Fontbonne College, and their work is exhibited all over, from New York to Dallas and points beyond.

The others are a weaver named Jean Larson McLane, Tim Tucker and Matthew Philpott, operations director for the International Building. He has a master's degree in entomology from University of California at Berkeley. His father, Gordon Philpott, is a local surgeon.

But all of them will tell you that the City Museum is really being done by people working at minimal wages, or volunteers, many of them from the right side of the tracks. "They just want to be a part of it," said Gail Cassilly, referring to both groups.

The volunteers include Thomas Danforth, son of the former U.S. senator, an heir to the Ralston Purina fortune, and such public relations heavyweights as Ruth K. Jacobson, retired senior partner of Fleishman-Hillard, Inc. Susan Kerth, whose husband Al is the voice of the movers and shakers group, Civic Progress, is also helping with publicity.

The City Museum began as for-profit venture, and shifted this year to a nonprofit organization after having difficulty in finding investors. Cassilly spent months persuading a bank, Mark Twain Bancshares, to lend the museum \$1 million.

Nonprofit means that Gail Cassilly is writing grants and making presentations to such groups as the Danforth Foundation, and is seeking \$1.6 million in state tax grants.

"We're looking for someone to take a leap of faith. We need risk takers. I should be installing a toilet, instead of writing grant proposals."

And then she hopes her husband doesn't say something that will alienate a prospective financial angel. As Tim Tucker told the Wall Street Journal, "We're begging right now."

Jacobson even took Bob Cassilly to media relations school. "I flunked," he said. Jacobson smiled, and pressed Cassilly to say something about how he wasn't in this for the money. There was that gleam in the eyes, as Cassilly gave a quote he said was from Sigmund Freud; he loves firing off quotations.

"All artists are motivated by sex, money and fame," he said.

Jacobson still smiled, and Gail Cassilly and Jean McLane rolled their eyes and put their heads in their hands.

Cassilly wasn't through: "This is a children's museum for adults. So we just learn by osmosis.

"Just go with the flow. Go without a plan. We're not tied to anything specific. And we want smells, from the summer camp of your youth."

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## City Museum

The museum opens on Oct. 25. Admission is \$6, free for children under a year. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday - closed on Monday and Tuesday.

• **Caption:** PHOTOPHOTOS by J.B. Forbes Of The Post-Dispatch Staff(1) Color Photo - RIGHT: It's madcap artist Bob Cassilly balancing on one leg atop a 60-foot water tower above the site of the new City Museum.(2) Color Photo - BELOW: In a whimsical touch, Cassilly moves a fiberglass hippo to the edge of his building on Washington Avenue. It overlooks the city, letting observers know this is not your typical place.(3) Color Photo - A pillar in the Lizard Lounge of the City Museum shows what can be done with FOD, found-object debris. This reptilian is made from floor sweepings from fighter-plane production and glue-gun pieces, with Kevlar around the collar and red produce bag netting for the tongue.(4) Photo - Sitting on red-granite foundation blocks from a demolished downtown building, Gail (Cassilly) and Bob Cassilly take a breather. Behind them are objects from their civic boneyard: columns from the old Stix School and, beyond that, rusting remains of the riverfront railroad viaduct.(5) Photo - Katie Cook (left), 10, and Chelsea Wheeler, 9, in front of a bathroom wall made of pans that once held mice used in hospital experiments.Color Photos - A World of Scraps (photo collage of nine photos described individually) - Every nook and cranny in the new City Museum holds a surprise - and also a lesson in recycling. Just about every wall, floor and ceiling is decorated with something saved from the junkpile or wrecking ball.(6) A facade from the old Vesper Buick dealership on West Pine has been rescued and now resides in an "Architectural Museum."(7) Old watchbands make up the scales on the back of a lizard.(8) Titanium bits used in McDonnell Douglas fighter-plane production decorate one wall.(9) Broken ballpoint pens find a second life as a branch, held by a lizard's claw.(10) Metal pans from Washington University Medical School are transformed into a curving, high-tech wall.(11) Stones and shells from the shore of Lake Erie spell out the words "Lizard Lounge."(12) Conveyor rollers from the old shoe warehouse, painted by kids, make a moving, touchable bannister.(13) Leftover tiles from St. Louis Centre make up this mosaic.(14) Wrenches (center) once used by iron workers are welded together to create a wrought-iron railing.

• *Index terms:* FOLK ART; ECCENTRIC; SALVAGE MATERIAL; BIO BIOGRAPHY CREATOR; VISIONARY; BACKGROUND; HISTORY; LOCATION PRICE COST; OPERATING HOURS; SCHEDULED OPENING; PROFILE; BOB CASSILLY, GAIL CASSILLY; CITY MUSEUM

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