

UP ON THE ROOFTOP: HO! HO! HO!

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* Visionary artist-recycler Bob Cassilly now is putting a dome atop the City Museum. He plans a futuristic playground, wading pools, fountains and a restaurant there, with ramps going to the top -- and he's got a building permit. "You're going to have this bird's-eye view of all of these places you aren't allowed to go," he said. "We can have Circus Flora in the spring and people can eat dinner here."

What's it like to work for . . .

"A lunatic," offers one welder.

"A madman," adds another.

And so begins an interview with welders who work for artist Bob Cassilly.

"Well, it's never boring. Where else can you go and do the sort of stuff he's trying to do?" said production foreman Roger Coleman. "We know every job is going to be bigger and more interesting than the last one."

This time, the job is to transform the roof at 701 North 15th Street, home of the City Museum, into a playground. Imagine wading pools, fabulous views and tasty food under the stars.

Or not.

Cassilly, who owns the museum building and its neighbor at 1501 Washington Avenue -- together, they were known as the International Shoe complex -- could alter his plans at the drop of the hat. That's his way. But one thing is for sure: This roof will top any along the St. Louis skyline.

Downtown commuters may have noticed already that Coleman's crew has erected a dome, 50 feet tall and 70 feet wide, atop the 10-story building. The dome came from the St. Louis Science Center's Planetarium, which will install a new sky theater next year.

Cassilly, an avid recycler, kept the frame after he won the demolition contract with the Science Center. Cassilly said he lost \$20,000 on the job, but he doesn't mind. He wanted the gig not for the dough, but to get the dome.

Not surprisingly, Cassilly has no budget or timeline. But he does have a building permit, which is more than he can say for other projects.

You know the school bus that's perched like a diving board on the edge of the roof? Cassilly is still working on the permit for that. Same goes for the scaffolding that scales the building. And, because he lacked the proper permits, he recently put on hold plans to turn an old cement plant on the riverfront into a sculpture playground.

Cassilly envisions a completed dome with a look of the Thunderdome in the "Mad Max" movie. It will be a domed venue for any number of events. He already has installed a hot tub on the dome's peak. Elsewhere on the roof, he will erect large windmills to pump water into 100,000-gallon water tanks. Those tanks will feed numerous fountains.

"It's going to have this futuristic look with swirling colors and ramps going all the way to the top. You're going to have this bird's-eye view of all of these places you aren't allowed to go," Cassilly said. "We can have Circus Flora in the spring and people can eat dinner here."

People will be allowed to scale the scaffolding on the building's exterior to reach the roof or to go inside and scramble up the city's largest interior climbing wall. Coming down will be even more fun.

Cassilly imagines children sliding down the spiral chutes that once carried shoes from the top floor to the ground. Perhaps people will be able to exit the slides on different floors to visit various displays. Those displays may explore different decades or types of music. He hasn't decided yet.

Cassilly also plans to transform part of the parking lot into an "erector set for big boys." Spectators will be able to manipulate cranes and pick up large objects like demolished cars.

"No more Betty Crocker Easy Bake Ovens for these kids," Cassilly said with a laugh.

So how will this elaborate project be financed?

"I have my means. I own the building."

When is it going to open?

"I don't know."

How are you going to sanitize the hot tub and waterslides?

"I don't know. How do they keep swimming pools clean?"

What about kids falling over the side?

"People trip over carpeting. They don't fall off 10-story buildings."

Cassilly looks up from his model - well, not a model per se, but the lid of a trash can covered in clay - and explains why logistics can't slow him down.

"Look, I am a compulsive builder. I'll do the stuff no one else will do because they're all afraid of being sued," said Cassilly. "I've got to keep going. I don't care if people say it's impossible."

Cassilly's willfulness has created bad blood as well as good art. Cassilly has admitted that last month he vandalized one of his most popular works, the Turtle Park playground. He spray-painted turtles with tears and words like "Help, I can't breathe." Cassilly, who was livid after the St. Louis parks department coated the turtles with an epoxy, called the graffiti an improvement.

He also infuriated a St. Louis neighborhood association when he replaced - without permission - a 20-foot section of the World's Fair Wall behind the 5800 block of Lindell Boulevard with concrete sculptures. He also has clashed with the board of his own creation, the City Museum, and now is no longer involved with the institution.

Indeed, Cassilly's plans for the roof will in no way be affiliated with the City Museum, which Cassilly and his wife, Gail Soliwoda Cassilly, opened three years ago. Even his friends say he has a quick temper and a tendency to grandstand.

Still, tenant Tom Kline likes Cassilly's can-do attitude. Kline, who operates Windows on Washington at 1501 Washington and Windows off Washington next door at 701 North 15th, plans to run the banquet facility on the roof.

"The question isn't, will it happen? The question is, when and how?" said Kline. "Sure, the plans are indefinite, but they've done a lot of the load and stress tests. Something is definitely going to happen. We don't have all those cranes up there for nothing."

- Caption: PHOTO(1) Color Photo headshot - (Bob) Cassilly"A compulsive builder"(2) Color Photo by LAURIE SKRIVAN/POST-DISPATCH - Bob Cassilly's work crew has installed the frame of a dome from the Planetarium on the roof of the City Museum, the first step in plans to incorporate water slides, fountains and a restaurant into a playground that the artist playfully calls "the City Museum in Exile." No completion date has been set, but the ideas keep coming and evolving.
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