

THE CURIOUS COURSE OF CITY MUSEUM

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* The downtown attraction began life four years ago in a former shoe factory as an "unmuseum" dedicated to the unconventional. Today, its founders are going separate ways -- philosophically and legally -- and the museum is experiencing growing pains as it strives to be more bottom line.

Sculptor Bob Cassilly had an impulse to construct an enormous playground where his friends could build new treasures from St. Louis' discarded junk. His wife, Gail Cassilly, had a different idea: to design a museum where the community could learn about obscure chapters of history and art forms such as pottery and weaving.

Together they opened the City Museum in 1997 in a derelict warehouse in a desolate corner of downtown St. Louis.

Four years later, City Museum welcomes more than 300,000 visitors a year, operates with a \$2.7 million budget and has 76 full- and part-time employees. Children love to slide down the old exhaust tube and scamper up the Cassilly-designed ramp to peer into the "puking pig," an antique tank that dumps 100 gallons of water into a tidal cave. They also like the everyday circus, train rides and changing exhibits that have featured topics as varied as shoes, Louis Sullivan and the Post-Dispatch's Weatherbird. Across the globe, newspapers and travel guides marvel at the museum's eclectic design, use of recycled treasures and seminal role in the revival of the Washington Avenue loft district.

But behind the scenes, the museum has struggled to balance the books and find its market. Though the City Museum has not technically defaulted on its loan, it has asked Firststar Bank to restructure its mortgage payments. It also has started a search for a permanent CEO with a business background.

"It's tough to move from the gleam in someone's eye to an institution. There are growing pains," said Pat Rich, a veteran arts administrator who agreed in February to act as interim CEO. "That's not unusual. That's typical."

A not-so-typical problem facing the City Museum is the divorce of its founders. After 17 years of marriage, Bob and Gail Cassilly have separated. Though a visitor would never notice, the couple's troubles have made life at St. Louis' favorite fun house even more bizarre.

"It's awkward. I can't say it's not," said deputy director and longtime neighbor Jean Steck. "We all know it's there."

Gail Cassilly has taken a leave of absence as the museum's director and sold her half of the building back to Bob and developer David Jump. Yet she is still there every day working on the upcoming exhibit on toasters. Cassilly says he is no longer affiliated with the museum. But he is there, too, grafting metal dragonheads onto tree limbs and designing on the mosaic floors. Bob Cassilly also is working on what he calls "City Museum in Exile," a labyrinth of new tunnels and chutes. One day he hopes to open a rooftop restaurant and an inside climbing wall.

Though their projects will be forever linked, Bob and Gail Cassilly's styles could not be more different. The two met at Fontbonne College and have two children. Bob Cassilly, 51, is a strapping man with a perpetual tan from working outside all day. A self-proclaimed artistic anarchist, he has a hot temper and a big mouth. Recently he has been in the news protesting plans for a Social Security Administration building directly west of the City Museum. He says the department should locate in an existing building instead of taking space needed for parking. Gail Cassilly, 53, wears spiky blond hair and shuns much of the publicity Bob craves. Bob accuses Gail of turning City Museum into a top-heavy institution with superfluous programs. Gail says Bob does not understand what it takes to run an efficient museum that serves the community and attracts charitable gifts.

The City Museum's start

Bob and Gail Cassilly bought the 10-story home of the City Museum and its neighbor at 1509 Washington Avenue for \$525,000 in 1993 after the Missouri Botanical Garden bought their old building on Shaw Boulevard. The downtown buildings were once home to the International Shoe Co.

"All of a sudden we had the means to indulge this idea," Gail Cassilly said. "So we washed up the brick, cleaned the doors that people had been urinating on for years, planted trees.

"People were interested in the revitalization of downtown, and we were the most visible thing going."

The Washington Avenue building soon attracted tenants, the most notable the catering facility Windows on Washington. Meanwhile, next door, Bob Cassilly and his friends started to build tunnels and restore salvage from demolished schools and stores.

Eventually, the Cassillys decided to open their fantasy world to the public. But money was growing scarce. To take advantage of various tax credits, the couple agreed to file as a nonprofit organization. The term is more than a legal designation. It means the museum must select a board that has the right to select a director, set the institution's mission and approve its budget.

That decision proved to be a turning point for City Museum and the Cassilly marriage.

"Like the Little Rascals putting on a play"

When the City Museum opened, supporters christened it the "unmuseum" - a noisy jungle where patrons could speak above a whisper and touch the art. The museum's unconventional style stretched to its management. Steck likes to tell the story about how she and Gail Cassilly checked out a guide to starting a museum. But the manual left out basics - like making sure to install enough phone lines, to hire male and female janitors for the restrooms and, oh, yeah, to be wary of financial administrators who embezzle \$25,000.

They learned those lessons the hard way. They have since recouped the stolen money from the former employee.

"We were like the Little Rascals putting on a play," said Steck. "There was all sorts of things we didn't know, but we had to learn fast."

Gail Cassilly also learned that goodwill does not pay bills.

"We would go to funders and they would want to know our exhibit schedule for the next three years. Three years? I'm working on the next week," recalled Cassilly. "I think I had a certain naivete about the fact that because we were good, all we had to do is say 'pretty please' and people would hand us something. Not only would they not do that, they would make us fill out all of these papers and make us wait forever."

Gail Cassilly and the board agreed that the museum should spend less on new installations and more on computers, staff and education programs.

"We had the physical environment that was so beckoning, but we also had to decide how we were going to serve the public," said Gail Cassilly. "As a teacher for 13 years, I think I saw it differently from the start. I knew if we were going to be a place for the community, we had to listen to what they want. That is what it means to be a nonprofit."

To Bob Cassilly, that was the problem. He always imagined a place where guests would plunk down their money and run free. But for better or worse, his playground was turning into a full-fledged cultural institution.

"They want to turn it into a respectable museum," Bob Cassilly said. "The point was to break that lock, to be a place about irony and duality, not bogus craft projects. They're bringing it down to the level of a typical St. Louis institution. I don't believe it should take all of that money to run a playground."

The future

Though some observers are enraptured by the unfolding Cassilly melodrama, Rich has seen this drama happen countless times. She even has a name for the phenomenon: founder flounder.

"What happens is that an artist has a great vision - maybe not a long-term one - and he or she gets it going and it takes off. All of a sudden, they realize they have a huge audience but no chairs," said Rich. "Founders are rarely interested in writing grant proposals and though they love talking about their creation, they don't want to be out there fund-raising. They want to be out creating. That's what they do."

The City Museum relies on door receipts for half of its income. The rest comes from grants. Unlike St. Louis' most popular institutions - the Missouri History Museum, the St. Louis Science Center, the St. Louis Art Museum, the St. Louis Zoo and the Missouri Botanical Garden - the City Museum gets little tax support.

To help increase gifts, the board recently hired a development director who will write grants, expand memberships and raise money. For instance, in the past the City Museum failed to apply for a variety of corporate and foundation grants, and it did not call patrons when their memberships lapsed. All of that will change now. The board last week raised admission to \$7.50 from \$6 to cover maintenance costs.

Though some patrons have groused about the increase, Rich insists that the City Museum operates a responsible budget. A survey done by the Association of Youth Museums shows that City Museum's spending is similar to other institutions its size.

The board hopes to find a permanent director who, while providing fiscal certainty, will respect the inspiration that led to the museum.

"We don't want someone who will take the City Museum in a direction different than what the founder envisioned," said board chairman

Randy Lipton. "We want the creative aspects that the Cassillys brought to continue and thrive so that it's there for generations to come when Bob and Gail and the rest of us are gone."

In the meantime, Rich is minding the issues patrons REALLY care about: dry floors and clean toilets.

"Research shows that people won't return to a place they don't think is safe or clean. Those nitty-gritty issues really matter," said Rich.

For her part, Gail Cassilly hopes to return permanently to curate museum exhibits. Bob Cassilly, on the other hand, has sold his half of the Washington Avenue building to buy an old cement plant near the Mississippi River. He wants to open it as an elaborate sculpture playground. Will it be a nonprofit?

"No way. I've learned my lesson," said Cassilly. "Maybe I'm just allergic to parliamentary procedure."

Meanwhile, Steck is philosophic about the split.

"I think the tension between the organization and art has been good," said Steck. "I wouldn't change a thing that has happened to us."

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City Museum is not a gallery of the traditional

Newcomers sometimes mistake the City Museum for a museum about St. Louis' history -- and to some extent it is. But it's not about St. Louis' early settlers and mayors, but about the building blocks that made St. Louis.

The City Museum's three floors are quite literally recycled from buildings that now exist only in our memories.

The first floor has glass doors from the Famous-Barr Southtown; a giant slinky that, in a prior life, was a heat exchanger at the Anheuser-Busch brewery; and a wall made of mouse cages from Washington University's research laboratories. Guests can explore 4,000 feet of tunnels and cave paintings by acclaimed artist Mary Sprague.

The second floor includes Art City, an enormous studio where artists demonstrate their crafts, and the Shoelace Factory, where laces move from spool to spool.

The third floor features special exhibits as well as the St. Louis Architecture Museum, where visitors can see the facades of old buildings. Other City Museum highlights are Beatnik Bob's, where guests can grab a corn dog, and Lizard Lounge, where reptiles are fashioned from watchbands.

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City Museum

Where: 701 North 15th Street

Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Friday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; closed Monday-Tuesday.

Admission: \$7.50, children under 2 free, group rates available in advance

Telephone: 314-231-2489

- Caption: PHOTOCOLOR Photos by TEAK PHILLIPS /POST-DISPATCH(1) Amid tensions between him and City Museum, artist Bob Cassilly is continuing his quest for a museum filled with sculptures created out of discarded materials. His new project, which he calls "City Museum in Exile," is located in the same building as City Museum, which he founded but is no longer affiliated with. Cassilly is still part owner of the building.(2) Gail Cassilly makes final adjustments to a display of toasters in City Museum, a project she undertook during a separation from her husband, Bob Cassilly. The two founded the museum, but since have parted company over what direction the museum should take.

- Memo: INSTITUTIONS

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