

LET'S BE THANKFUL FOR THOSE WHO SEE THINGS IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT

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Cement Land - the provisional name for sculptor Bob Cassilly's latest vision -- is eight miles north of the Gateway Arch. The river here is greener and wider than in the city, and it's banked with trees. "It's as wild and pristine as any area you've seen, and it's in the city of St. Louis," Cassilly says. When the sun sets, the Edward Jones Dome glows, he says, just like a monument.

Here is where Cassilly, creator of City Museum, plans to build an improbable playland of manmade mesas, lakes, castles, tower lookouts, a toboggan run and much more.

On this day -- fresh out of jail for attempting to save a church tower from demolition -- he's driven a borrowed Jeep to the very lip of a cliff to show off the site: 53 acres on either side of Riverview Boulevard acquired two years ago for about \$2 million.

The land closest to the river is indeed idyllic, ending in a long footbridge over the Mississippi. The western portion is dominated by the relics of what Cassilly says was the world's largest cement plant -- massive silos, looming steel-framed structures and in the center a soaring chimney, 30 feet around and over 200 feet tall.

The mound we're standing on is artificial. For the past two years, he's been collecting tons of dirt and debris for the grand transformation: a ring of manmade mesas that will connect to the industrial buildings via ramps to form a continuous aerial circuit. "It will be a half-mile round trip 100 feet in the air looking over the city," he says.

The valley will become a lake with boats that can go through the bases of the buildings and sections with "good water" where people can swim. He'll strip the siding off the steel frame buildings to create giant Erector sets. Less clear is what he plans to do with the old Bi-State buses, acquired for \$100 apiece and neatly arranged on the perimeter. Under construction already is a castle fashioned from city cobblestones discarded during the downtown street improvements. "They came under slabs of asphalt and debris. We raked it out on the fields and picked them up like potatoes," he says. He'll slap a spiral staircase around the outside of the 236-foot chimney. "It's an incredible lookout," he says. New York City once had 92 lookouts, he notes. "People like to go to high places."

Cassilly is in love with heights. For the past several years, he has been expanding his City Museum upwards, putting a dome and bus and towers on the rooftop and slowly filling all 10 floors with a wheelchair-accessible spiral of caves.

In his view, what downtown needs is more places with a view. "The first thing I'd do is fill the old Busch Stadium with dirt and make it the St. Louis Acropolis." He likes the idea of covering the downtown highway with a lid, but thinks there should be a high bridge too. "I'd do it as an organic shell shape and put shops like the Ponte Vecchio in Florence on either side. "

And with the high, there needs to be low. Underneath the Interstate 70 overpass that divides the football stadium from Laclede's Landing, he'd put "joints and bars" -- a seedy, out-of-control kind of place.

And he'd make it harder to park at the riverfront, so people would have to walk.

He points again to New York. "It's the most impractical city in the world and you want to go." Not that he has any plans to move.

"You couldn't do this in New York, he says, pointing to his future play land. All the energy seems directed at making St. Louis a more interesting place to be. And his inspiration seems to come from closer to home. He mentions Mark Twain more than once, likening his efforts in architecture to one of Twain's literary aims: to pique our imaginations by tapping into the child in each of us.

St. Louis should probably be thankful this visionary has decided to make this site his workbench.

- Memo: Linda Tucci writes about the businesspeople and the business deals that help to define our community. You can reach her at 314-340-8331.

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