

BOARD WILL SELL CITY MUSEUM TO ITS FOUNDER - FACILITY WILL BECOME FOR-PROFIT <

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The City Museum will change hands next month, from the board that has made it a top attraction to the creator who shaped its whimsical personality.

City Museum founder Bob Cassilly expects details of the sale to be finalized this week and that he will assume control of the museum March 8. The museum will stay open during the transition.

"It will look and feel very much the same," said Cassilly.

Admission will remain \$7.50. Many -- but not all -- of the museum's 70-odd employees will keep their jobs. Visitors still can crawl through tunnels, tour the St. Louis Architecture Museum and watch the everydaycircus. Parties still can rent the museum for special events and current memberships will remain valid.

Visitors will notice some changes. "Art City" - where artists teach youngsters everything from weaving to painting - will turn into "Project City," with activities changing daily. Cassilly also will eliminate exhibits like the museum's recent shows on purses and weddings. Known as a bad boy himself, Cassilly derides such shows as appealing to "good girls not bad boys."

"We're not really into exhibits. We're into building things you can play with," said Cassilly. "What I consider absolutely essential is the Museum of Mystery, Mirth and Mayhem, the Architecture Museum, the circus and the first floor exhibits. Everything else is up for grabs."

Why the museum's nonprofit board has chosen to disband after winning praise from more than a million guests is a complicated question.

The short answer is back rent. The museum owes Cassilly - who also is the museum's landlord - about a year's worth of rent. The two sides have fought over how much that is and have been unable to settle on terms for a long-term lease.

With the lease issue unresolved, the board said it could not raise money to keep the museum solvent. It owes creditors, including Cassilly, some \$2.5 million.

The long answer is much more complex. Cassilly has been at odds with the board since the museum opened in 1997. Although not involved in the museum's management, he is there nearly every day building new attractions. Gail Cassilly, Bob Cassilly's estranged wife, left her job as the museum's executive director last spring.

The board and Gail Cassilly wanted to establish education and fund-raising programs, following the model of traditional museums. Bob Cassilly preferred a looser structure where budgets might be altered on a whim and exhibits changed overnight.

Now Cassilly will have his way. The museum will be run as a for-profit business. He plans to expand into the northern part of the building this spring, adding a climbing wall, new chutes and tunnels and perhaps a roof top restaurant. Guests who want to visit both sides of the museum will pay an additional fee.

The City Museum opened in an old shoe factory at 701 North 15th Street in 1997. Cassilly and his friends resurrected St. Louis' forgotten junk - columns from a demolished school, an antique water tank, an old exhaust tube - and transformed them into a eccentric playground of history and art.

- Caption: PHOTOPHOTO - (Bob) Cassilly, Promises to build things to play with
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