

Cassilly and Sonnenschein present... an aquarium fit for a mermaid

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) - September 19, 2004

- Author/Byline: DIANE TOROIAN KEAGGY Of the Post-Dispatch
- Edition: Five Star Late Lift
- Section: A&E
- Page: G01

"The beauty of Bob Cassilly is he has the great physical talent to capture the imagination. My talent is to work with that imagination and create a learning opportunity. If it works, it could be a match made in heaven." St. Louis aquaman Leonard Sonnenschein uttered those words in 1994, and, no, it did not work out. Though Sonnenschein made plans to open the St. Louis Children's Aquarium in Cassilly's new City Museum back in 1997, the two men ultimately had a falling out -- a surprise to nobody because Sonnenschein and Cassilly are the sort of men who are always falling out with someone. Ten tumultuous years passed. Sonnenschein opened a modest aquarium in the Hanley Industrial Court but still dreamed of opening a world-class aquarium. In 2002, he announced plans to open a \$55 million facility, but his financing fell through. Meanwhile, Cassilly saved the City Museum from bankruptcy and broke ties with a number of its founders, including his former wife, artist Gail Cassilly. Still, the two could not ignore the stubborn truth of Sonnenschein's earlier assertion: Cassilly needed Sonnenschein to complete his "warehouse of adventure." And Sonnenschein needed Cassilly to create a magical setting for his 7,000 creatures. Finally, they came together this summer to open the World Aquarium on the second floor of the City Museum. And this time, Sonnenschein and Cassilly are getting along swimmingly. "I wouldn't say there was bad blood between us," says Cassilly. "We were children then. We've become more mature . . . maybe."

"We've evolved," says Sonnenschein. "We both have experience running a museum, dealing with the community. I love Bob now. I think he's amazing."

Making science fun Though the 13,500-square-foot World Aquarium exhibit opened this summer, most of the construction wrapped up this month. Featuring both Sonnenschein's sweeping collection and Cassilly's fantastical sculptures, the aquarium offers an enchanting look at the sea. Admission is \$12.50, which includes City Museum admission.

"This is the intersection of art and nature," says Sonnenschein. "We have found a way to make science fun."

Like the rest of the City Museum, the World Aquarium vibrates with the sound of screaming children as they pop their heads through the doughnut-shaped "Nemo" tank and splash in the tide pools. Kids are welcome to touch many of the animals here, including turtles, starfish, slipper lobsters, even sharks. The real thrill for most youngsters is the Plexiglas slide that cuts through the 50,000-gallon shark tank. Don't worry, the slide is not steep or fast, but it does afford visitors a dead-on look at 26 of ocean's deadly predators.

The shark tank is one of eight "realms of exploration" that showcase various ecosystems. In Rivers of the World, visitors feed the leaping pacu. Sand Castle Beach features "beach bunnies" -- actual rabbits -- and corals.

"We have all the fun stuff you do at the beach," says Sonnenschein. "You can play with the tortoises, touch the starfish, play in the tide pool."

"Yeah, all we need is a place in the corner where you can read trashy novels," says a joking Cassilly.

Over in the Hidden Forest, lizards and crocodiles slither through a swamp. When a mother recoiled at the sight of a homely sloth, Cassilly rejoiced.

"Great. We've got to have the scare-mommy factor out there," he says.

For better or worse, the World Aquarium bears little resemblance to such famous counterparts as the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago or the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, where wall-length tanks awe visitors into stunned silence. Nor does it conduct scientific research or participate in the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, the governing body of the nation's top wildlife institutions. Rather the World Aquarium feels more like a playground, where learning almost comes by accident. And that's just how Cassilly likes it.

"The City Museum makes you want to know," says Cassilly. "The point is not to learn every fact but to say, 'Wow, that's wonderful.' And if it's wonderful, it's worth preserving."

Homeless sharks? The aquarium's design is classic Cassilly -- whimsical and organic -- featuring carved mermaids, shells and enormous preying mantises with gigantic light bulbs for eyes. Children can scamper across snake-like ramps and crawl through tunnels.

"We want everything to look like it was made by nature, by wind, by gravity," says Cassilly.

Sonnenschein's collection features creatures both exotic and ordinary: poison-arrow frogs, archer fish, clownfish, jellyfish, barracudas. It even includes a stonefish -- the world's most venomous fish. We, a two-headed, albino black rat snake, is located at the center of the

aquarium, where staff can keep an eye on it. Thieves heisted the snake last month, but thanks to a tipster, police returned the rare snake to the World Aquarium. Sonnenschein said most of the animals come from well-meaning animal lovers who got more than they bargained for.

"Someone buys a pet shark, and it's only a foot long," says Sonnen-schein. "Then it outgrows the 55-gallon tank and then the 100-gallon tank, and it's eating everything. By that time, they want to give it to the zoo, but the zoo doesn't take sharks, so then they come to me. Almost all of these animals would be homeless."

Sonnenschein's devotion to fish extends to his kitchen. He won't eat shark, swordfish or any other "top-level predator" because it disrupts the ocean's food chain. Nor will he eat shrimp because shrimp farms are considered major polluters. But carp from the Mississippi is all right.

Cassilly, by contrast, likes to annoy the fish by tapping on their glass tanks.

"I only tease the mean ones," he insists.

Despite their different perspectives on sea life, both men agree the aquarium enhances the City Museum experience.

"I've always wanted this to be a city with all of the cool things of the world here," says Cassilly. Fish story A timeline of the long and winding road Sonnenschein followed to World Aquarium's new home at the City Museum: 1987 Sonnenschein revives the long-dormant St. Louis Aqua Center Inc. and announces plans to build a \$36 million aquarium near Union Station. 1989 Union Station breaks ties with the Aqua Center. Developers say Sonnenschein failed to conduct design and feasibility studies. 1990 Pontoon Beach gives Sonnenschein \$38,000 to study a \$40 million aquarium. 1991 Sonnenschein scales back his Pontoon Beach plans and proposes a \$1.25 million aquarium in an old supermarket. Aquarium is never built. 1993 Sonnenschein opens the Mid-America Aquacenter, a 23,000-square-foot aquarium in Chesterfield. 1994 When word surfaces of strife between Sonnenschein and his Chesterfield landlord, Bob Cassilly floats the idea of an aquarium in the International Shoe Building, home of the City Museum. Later, Cassilly decides he cannot work with Sonnenschein. 1996 Facing mounting legal trouble at his Chesterfield location, Sonnenschein opens the St. Louis Children's Aquarium in the Hanley Industrial Court. 1998 Sonnenschein proposes converting the old Arena into the World Aquarium at the St. Louis Arena. The idea never generates much political support or financial backing. 2002 Sonnenschein announces plans to build a \$55 million aquarium in Richmond Heights but fails to make an the initial payment. 2004 Cassilly and Sonnenschein revisit plans to open an aquarium at the City Museum. The exhibit opens in August. -- Diane Toroian Keaggy World Aquarium When: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Thursday, 9 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday, and 10 a.m.-11 p.m. Saturday Where: City Museum, 701 North 15th Street How much: \$12.50 (includes Museum admission) More info: 314-647-9594, www.citymuseum.org

• Caption: photoCOLOR PHOTOS BY KAREN ELSHOUT / Post-Dispatch (1) Simmie Graham (right) says about her experience at the World Aquarium at City Museum: "I'm seeing the world through a kid's eyes again." Her two daughters, Maggie, 3, and Sarah, 4, crawl through a Plexiglas tunnel in the big tank to get a closer look. (2) A Kemp Ridley's sea turtle swims around in its tank. The turtle is one of the most endangered sea turtles, and this one cannot be returned to the wild because it has a cleft shell. (3) Bob Cassilly creativity (4) Leonard Sonnenschein determination (5) Charlene Dirig holds her daughter, Sissy, 4, over a tank so that she can pet the fish. (6) Photo by KAREN ELSHOUT / POST-DISPATCH - A good-natured iguana tolerated a cockatoo's stroll in their cage at the World Aquarium at City Museum. In addition to aquatic life, creatures such as snakes, lizards and a two-toed sloth are on display.

• Index terms: aquarium;fish;museum;sea

• Record: 1000095159

• Copyright: Copyright (c) 2004 St. Louis Post-Dispatch