

## City Museum is there because he imagined it - Bob Cassilly rejects market studies and nonprofit status and has seen revenue triple.

*St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) - May 27, 2005*

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- Edition: Five Star Late Lift
- Section: Business
- Page: B5
- Readability: 4-5 grade level (Lexile: 790)

It's safe to say that Bob Cassilly's mind is one of the leading tourist attractions in St. Louis. From that mind spilled City Museum, with its conglomeration of found objects welded together, slides, chutes and carvings of sprites and goblins. It is one man's fantasy of a playground for children and adults come to life. In the last two years, attendance has more than doubled, to some 650,000. Cassilly is now working to turn a former cement plant on the Mississippi River in north St. Louis into another one-of-a-kind attraction. He has a reputation as an enfant terrible. He defaced the giant turtles that he created near the Zoo because he objected to an epoxy finish applied by the city. And he wrested control of his museum from its nonprofit board by throwing tantrums and refusing to negotiate. But Cassilly may have found the only place where forever thinking like a preadolescent has paid off. --- Have you been surprised by how big it's gotten? I am an artist. A artist has no contingency for success. The name "City Museum" conjures up something static and quiet, where you go to look at things. Have you thought about changing it? In the original Greek, museum meant dwelling place of the muses. I like to see us as kind of like the devil's advocate or the loyal opposition to the rest of society . . . I figure every hour a kid spends here they are not watching television or sitting at a computer, so it must be valuable. I guess the difference between us and other children's museums is that we don't really cater to kids. We don't do market studies to find out what people would like. We didn't figure out who our demographics were. We built it because we wanted to build it. How do you describe City Museum? I don't. That's the whole point, to make it enigmatic. I like to see it as a mirror ball, where everyone is seeing it from a different direction. In a way, that is why it is called city, because city is different to everybody, and it's something that you can't really put your hands around and grasp because it's always changing. How do you come up with ideas? I just revert back to 7 years old, laying in bed and looking at the ceiling. You're looking at the plaster and, all of a sudden, you start imagining different things. I go out, I start building things with no idea where they are going. For me, creativity is simply taking advantage of chance. The whole theme of the museum is not reproducible, because it was taking advantage of things that were available at the time. What has been the difference between the nonprofit museum and the new for-profit approach? It makes a profit. Revenue has increased threefold in the last three years . . . This is the first time in seven years that I have actually been able to take a dollar out of the City Museum for anything. What's wrong with being nonprofit? All they wanted to do was follow rules. Plus they couldn't pay the bills, and they were losing money. Of course, I wouldn't give them a lease so they couldn't raise money. So it was a standoff. When you went to this management model, a lot of people predicted you wouldn't succeed, because you couldn't get grants anymore, and gifts to the museum wouldn't be tax-deductible. Did that make any difference? No. There's a level of extra expense you have to spend to be a nonprofit. Then you have to go around and grovel, something that doesn't come naturally to me. We were never (planning) to be a nonprofit, and then we got kind of seduced into the idea of getting all these grants. . . . So it was a Faustian bargain really. But I got my soul back just in time. What is at the soul of City Museum? You've gotta be a little on the outlaw side if you are going to appeal to teenagers. We actually have a place that appeals to everyone from a 2-year-old to grandparents, so that's something of an accomplishment. You bought this building for 69 cents a square foot. Has that low price allowed you to make a profit? I treat this building like I do all the junk around here: I never try and use it for its original intended purpose. Everybody in the world was trying to figure out what to do with it, but it's not good for an office, it's not good for a warehouse, it's obsolete. It is 10 stories tall. When I got it, I had no idea what I could do with it. But it seemed like 750,000 square feet of opportunity. As the museum has gotten more successful, are there more rules? That's where the art comes in, getting around the rules. . . . Mine has become this horizontal career. I'm not director or anything like that. I stay working with the (construction) guys and stuff, so I don't have to figure out where the insurance comes from or whatever. Anybody who ever starts something is not the person to run it. In the end, you become this parody of why you started it. At least I know that, so I have fired myself right up front. Do a lot of parents think the museum is dangerous? What's more pleasurable for kids than to scare their mommy? The whole point is to make it look sharp and dangerous, because it makes people pay attention. You can't really fall. You can get scratched, which is good because that is a cause and effect. You don't learn much if you don't know risk. How do you insure the place? I spend a lot of money on it. Insurance has gone up 300 percent in the last three years. You grew up here. Did you ever think about leaving St. Louis? I moved away to Hawaii for a year when I was in school. Actually I spent months, years, looking for the perfect panacea. And every place I went, there I was. I figured it was just me. I came back to the place I tried to escape from, because where else can you do all this stuff? Is your next creation progressing? It was, at one time, the world's largest cement company. It's 56 acres of ruins up there. It looks over downtown. These big silos are 100 feet tall. I'm filling in between the silos with these berms, or mounds. First of all, it will be a place where we can do things that are normally illegal, I suppose. You can climb through ruins. You will be able to take a boat from the top of a silo four-fifths of a mile around a circle through these industrial buildings and come back down into a lake. There's a 225-foot chimney you can throw rocks off of. --- BOB CASSILLY Age: 55 Education: Bachelor's and master's degrees in art from Fontbonne University.

Personal: Lives in a loft above the City Museum with wife, Giovanna, and children, Max, 19, Daisy, 16, and Dylan, 4. Career: Cassilly says he's "never earned a weekly paycheck." A sculptor and artist, he has sold sculpture to several zoos and amusement parks, including Busch Gardens. He also bought and sold real estate. Opened City Museum, 1997.

- Caption: PHOTOPHOT\* by KEVIN MANNING / POST-DISPATCH - Bob Cassily, founder of the City Museum, stands on a giant praying mantis that once adorned a building at Missouri Botanical Garden and now resides on the roof of the City Museum. PHOT\* - BOB CASSILY
- Memo: 5 MINUTES WITH ...  
POST-DISPATCH COLUMNIST MARTIN VAN DER WERF CHATS WITH LOCAL BUSINESSPEOPLE

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- *Index terms: PROFILE;ENTERTAINMENT;BOB CASSILY;"CITY MUSEUM"; PROFILE*
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