

High (and not so dry) - City Museum founder dreams big for new rooftop attraction with plans for fountains, acrobats and a Ferris wheel.

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You've had a good ride, yellow school bus.

For a decade you have ranked as the most surreal object atop the City Museum's roof.

Now make way for the Ferris wheel. This summer, the carnival big wheel will offer thrill seekers the ride of their lives, about 180 feet off the ground.

The Ferris wheel is part of the City Museum's so-called rooftop attraction, the latest creation from City Museum founder/artist/madman Bob Cassilly. Poised to open this month, the roof will feature fountains, ramps and bridges, a cafe, a circus big top and three slides, including a 10-story ride to the bottom of the museum.

Cassilly has big dreams for the space - acrobats swinging from a trapeze underneath the one-time dome of the St. Louis Planetarium, families lounging under the shade of B-52 parachutes, kids splashing in the fountain fashioned from a carved elephant's trunk.

"We're not calling it a wading pool," he said of the fountain, "but if you fall in, you fall in."

The little details, however, are in the air. Cassilly has yet to set a name, opening date or ticket price. He may just charge an elevator fee; those who scale the spiral stairway to the top would be rewarded with free admission. And who knows exactly when workers will hoist the 1940s Ferris wheel piece by piece onto the roof.

"Everything takes twice as long and costs twice as much as it should," Cassilly said.

And that would be how much?

"I don't talk about money. That would be vulgar," he said.

GOOD VS. EVIL WATER SLIDE

Meanwhile Cassilly is moving forward with plans to develop Cementland, his 54-acre amusement park near the Mississippi River. Actually, Cassilly hates the term "amusement park," but his description, "morality play between good and evil," won't fit on a conditional use permit.

Located at an old cement plant, the attraction will feature man-made mountains, beaches, pools and a river with tunnels for rowboats and inner tubes. The site's industrial ruins will offer a striking contrast to the park's wild beauty. Silos will support skywalks; 50-ton machines will stand guard at the entrance.

"All of these powerful machines will be taken over by nature," Cassilly said.

Cementland - the name may change - is scheduled to open in 2010.

Cassilly has floated vague ideas for the site for years, but was forced to reveal his plans a month ago after St. Louis and the village of Riverview ordered Cassilly to stop work on the property. The site straddles both cities, but to no one's surprise, Cassilly never obtained permits from either. Meanwhile, his crew built a large castle on the property where Cassilly's children would play during visits.

"Every time I came here it had grown," said Riverview Building Commissioner Dan Fraley, who photographed the ever-changing project during visits. "His story was always all of the work was being done in the city and then he'd tell the city all of the work was being done in Riverview. Finally we had to put our foot down. Let's just say working with him has been quite an experience."

Riverview Trustee Phyllis Paro won't hold Cassilly's prior infractions against him. Also a member of Riverview's planning and zoning commission, she has seen the plans and is impressed. The commission will study Cassilly's proposal this week.

"It looks pretty cool, and with a location so close to St. Louis, St. Louis County and Illinois, I'm sure it's going to be a good draw," Paro said. "There won't be anything like it."

A FLAWED BUILDER

The two projects have been on Cassilly's drawing board for nearly a decade. He started work on the roof in 2000, but turned his attention to Cementland during a nasty conflict with the City Museum's former board. After Riverview kicked him off the Cementland site in May, he decided to return to the roof.

"It's more fun than building condominiums," Cassilly said, referring to the loft homes his crew has built above the City Museum.

St. Louis' most imaginative recycler, Cassilly built the rooftop attraction with slate from a St. Louis roofing company, bricks picked from the rubble of Cementland, mirrored blocks from Barnes-Jewish Hospital, steel panels from Boeing, benches from St. Louis Community College at Forest Park and old Cypress tanning barrels.

The roof and the 10-story slide will be surrounded by railings and safety nets.

"I'm absolutely not worried about someone falling off the slide," Cassilly said. "I'm more concerned about people dropping something."

Cassilly has applied for, but has yet to receive, building permits for the roof, St. Louis building officials confirm. Inspectors must sign off on the roof before Cassilly can open it to the public.

St. Louis officials declined to comment on Cassilly's unorthodox approach, but clearly they would prefer Cassilly ask for permission first, not forgiveness later.

Cassilly claims he knows no other way to build.

"This is the truth - I walk around and get my ideas and I say, 'Ah,'" Cassilly said. "You know how viruses invade a cell - viruses have to be in the right position at the right time to see an opening. That's how my brain works. I can't help myself. I'm a flawed builder. It's not like I do this out of viciousness."

Watch

STLtoday.com/multimedia • Take a video tour of the City Museum's

rooftop with its founder, Bob Cassilly.

- Caption: PHOTOPHOTO - Daniel Heggarty works on a slide overlooking the rooftop at the City Museum near downtown Tuesday. The museum's new rooftop attraction will include a cafe, slides and a circus big top. It is scheduled to open this month. Erik M. Lunsford | Post-Dispatch PHOTO - Bob Cassilly won't say how much the remake costs. "I don't talk about money. That would be vulgar." Christian Gooden | Post-Dispatch PHOTO - Tyler Johnson works on the City Museum roof Tuesday. Bob Cassilly often builds first and gets permits later, as officials in St. Louis and Riverview have found. Erik M. Lunsford | Post-Dispatch

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