

BOB CASSILLY • 1949-2011: Sculptor's inner child was never far from the surface - 'The city has lost some of its wonder.' - City Museum creator is found dead on a bulldozer at his Cementland project.

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Bob Cassilly called himself a "flawed builder." To the chagrin of building inspectors and his attorneys, Cassilly worked without permits or blueprints. But his artistic talent and boundless imagination wowed St. Louisans for decades.

"This is the truth - I walk around and get my ideas and I say, 'Ah,'" Cassilly said while on site at Cementland in 2008. "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."

The urban playground was the latest project for the artist and entrepreneur who founded City Museum, created whimsical sculptures for parks and attractions across the region, salvaged St. Louis' forgotten treasures and helped resurrect an ailing downtown.

"A lot of people live their life in the middle of the road, but Bob lived on the edge," said Tim Tucker, who helped Cassilly develop the International Shoe Building, which houses City Museum. "He was a visionary. He could see the value in discarded architectural remnants. And he could see the value in discarded real estate. And cities. The City Museum really was a catalyst for change downtown."

A UNIQUE INSTITUTION

Whenever Mayor Francis Slay travels, people tell him they love City Museum. Fodor's touts it as "an institution unlike any museum you've been to before," and the New York Times calls it a "must-see for visiting gerbils of any age."

"It has earned international acclaim," Slay said on Monday. "He made this totally unique, phenomenal creation that no one else has and anybody can enjoy."

Cassilly opened City Museum in 1997 in an abandoned shoe factory with his former wife, Gail Cassilly. Their first mission statement: "To reawaken the childlike imagination, joy and sense of wonder in all of us." Today the museum draws 630,000 visitors annually.

Cassilly never lost that spirit himself. Perpetually tan from working outside, he had the energy and interests of a 9-year-old boy - climbing ladders, playing with dragons, scaring nervous moms.

"It's said all of the time, but Bob really was a big kid," said Kurt Knickmeyer, who grew up with Cassilly in Webster Groves and worked on his crews for about 30 years. "Years before he opened the City Museum, I remember how he took some old rotting boards and built a T-rex with the kids in Lafayette Square. He was always moving in the direction of the City Museum. He always knew what kids wanted."

Cassilly built City Museum with salvaged remnants from St. Louis' rich architectural history. The museum's front doors once welcomed shoppers at the old Southtown Famous-Barr; the ground-floor bathrooms are lined with 2,800 stainless-steel mouse cages from Washington University research labs; and the so-called "puking pig" that splashes onlookers served as a water tank for an 1880s fire pump.

In 2002, Cassilly opened MonstroCity, a jungle gym in the sky where children could explore airplanes, a firetruck and a tram from Grant's Farm. And a few years back, Cassilly's crew hoisted a 1940s Ferris wheel, piece by piece, onto the museum's roof. Along the way, he carved tunnels, acquired the world's largest No. 2 pencil and hosted countless yo-yo conventions, tattoo expos, burlesque performers and weddings. After exchanging vows, couples plunge down the museum's three-story slide.

But behind the wackiness was a message of reverence for St. Louis history, says artist and longtime collaborator Bill Christman, creator of City Museum's Museum of Mirth, Mystery and Mayhem.

"If you rank important people in the history of St. Louis - not just artists - you would have to include Bob Cassilly. He showed young people that you can take old, abandoned stuff and make it beautiful," Christman said. "Hopefully these children grow up and don't tear stuff down and ignore the everyday beauty of what's around them."

But the museum almost did not survive the divorce of its founders, who separated in 2001. Cassilly bought out his wife and kicked out the nonprofit board that had operated the museum. He wanted to run the show.

"They want to turn it into a respectable museum," Cassilly said at the time. "The point was to break that lock, to be a place about irony and duality, not bogus craft projects. They're bringing it down to the level of a typical St. Louis institution."

LEGAL ISSUES

Cassilly never liked the term "museum." Museum connotes text panels and hushed whispers. He envisioned kids crawling through the carved tunnels, marveling at the world's largest pair of underwear, petting stingrays at the World Aquarium, cheering tumbling gymnasts at the Everyday Circus and swinging on ropes.

Cassilly insisted that what made City Museum so thrilling was the perceived danger, but many visitors suffered very real injuries. City Museum has been sued more than two dozen times in the last decade by those who allege that they or their loved ones have been injured there.

In 2006, a 18-month-old toddler slipped through a small gap in a MonstroCity seating area and fell about 15 feet to the pavement. She suffered fractures to her skull and to the bones around her eyes. That same year, 10-year-old Gavin Kirk fell 13 feet from MonstroCity and fractured his skull. Most of the cases were settled, either confidentially or for five-figure sums or less, court documents show.

In 2006, a St. Louis jury awarded a former Webster University student \$100,000 for her loss of two fingers to the museum's "puking pig" water tank in 2003. Jurors found the woman, who crossed a guardrail to try to tip the tank, 80 percent responsible for her injury.

Four cases against City Museum appeared to be pending Monday.

Bob Hermann, who served as Kirk's attorney, took his case to trial but settled after jury selection.

"It became clear that the appeal of the City Museum was so great that it was going to be hard to find a jury that would consider liability for his actions," Hermann said. "He played by his own rules."

Cassilly often frustrated city officials, clients and his crew. One such case happened in 2000 when Cassilly vandalized his Turtle Park, spray painting "Help" and "We've been slimed" on the turtles' backs. He objected to the type of epoxy city parks workers had used to protect the sculptures.

"He showed that you can go up against the bureaucrats at City Hall and win," Christman said. "He had enough backbone to do the right thing."

BOB CASSILLY'S COMMISSIONS

Sea Lion Fountains - St. Louis Zoo, 1999

Mysterious Monarch and Lopatapillar - Faust Park, 1998

Hippopotamus Park - Central Park, New York City, 1997

Turtle Park - Forest Park, 1996

Hippo Playground - Riverside Park, New York City, 1993

Six Lighted Entry Markers - St. Louis Galleria, 1991

Marlin Perkins Bust - St. Louis Zoo, 1987

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ONLINE

Sign a guestbook, see City Museum photo galleries, 360-degree views and more. STLtoday.com

- Caption: Photo by Christian Gooden • cgooden@post-dispatch.com RIGHT • City Museum founder Bob Cassilly stands amid his rooftop expansion in 2008 that included fountains, pools and statues. Photo by Emily Rasinski • erasinski@post-dispatch.com BELOW • Jacque Brown (right) lights the candles of her grandchildren Janine Gassel, 6, and Cameron Gassel, 11, at a vigil Monday night in memory of Bob

Cassilly outside City Museum.

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