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DISPATCH

Citygarden, St. Louis

St. Louis's Citygarden, which celebrated its first anniversary in July, demonstrates one way to transform a "dead" downtown zone into a vibrant urban space. Connected to the city's major greenspace, Gateway Mall, Citygarden came into existence through a combination of renewal efforts, enlightened patronage, arts leadership, and unique landscaping.

The Gateway mall, currently one block wide and just over a mile long, borders Market Street, a main east-west artery, which ends at the Old Courthouse where the Dred Scott case was tried. The land slopes downward from there to the banks of the Mississippi River, which meets the Missouri River just north of the city. The Mall was proposed by Arthur Schwarz in the Schwarz & Van Hoefen downtown plan of 1960. Earlier, in 1940, a grand outdoor sculpture by Carl Milles was installed at the western edge of this swath of land, across from the then-bustling Union Station train terminal and hotel. In the 1960s, some buildings were razed to make way of the Mall, and Eero Saarinen's stainless

steel Gateway Arch was completed with great fanfare. In 1982, Richard Serra's *Twain* was installed on 1.14 acres officially named Serra Sculpture Park. Serra reportedly wanted this low-lying arrangement of eight rusting Cor-ten slabs to be the antithesis of the Gateway Arch.

When Citygarden opened (one block east of *Twain*) last year, it was flooded with visitors. Fulfilling the demands of an urban sculpture park, botanical garden, and re-presentation of a historic neighborhood, it provides, in two square blocks, a fully articulated multi-use site. Warren T. Byrd, Jr., a principal of Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects, was chosen by the Gateway Foundation to design the park. He deserves credit for a brilliant "green" concept based on St. Louis history. In effect, he has turned the three-acre park into a layered artistic adventure. The overall plan starts by dividing the site into three bands: river bluffs, flood plain, and river terrace.

The 23 sculptures featured in the Citygarden are sited so that each has its own space in which to

interact with viewers and with architectural and botanical features. The diverse group of sculptors includes Ju Ming, Mark di Suvero, Jean-Michel Folon, Bernar Venet, Jonathan Clarke, and Martin Puyear. Mimmo Paladino's *Zenit*, and aluminum horse with a geometric star from floating on its back, is nobly abstract. Tom Otterness's ironically named *Kindly Geppetto* lacks "kindly" features, suggesting instead a mad alchemist – or an ambitious artist who has sacrificed his soul to bring his work to "life." Each sculpture seems chosen to engage viewers, encourage play, and demonstrate art concepts.



Tom Claassen, *Untitled (Two Rabbits)*, 2004. Bronze, view of work installed at Citygarden.



Bernar Venet, *2 Arcs x 4 and 230.5 Degree Arc x5*, 1999. Cor-ten steel, view of works installed at Citygarden.

For example, Donald Baechler's 136-inch-tall, bronze *Scarecrow* – more funny than scary – tells viewers about scale and using humor to dispel fear. The selections also seem to reflect maintenance concerns. On my first visit, I thought that they resembled the sculptures that keep popping up in other city sculpture parks. My second, and more lasting impression, however, is that the choices are

intentionally international in scope, human in scale, and exemplary in their range of formal concerns and properties.

This is a “green” park in every sense. The drainage was custom-engineered with layers of fine and coarse gravel under the soil, and all of the water used in the garden, along with rain water, is collected, filtered, and recycled. There are no gates, fences, or

hours, and one can enter or leave from any direction – although a sophisticated security system monitors the park 24 hours a day. Visitors can learn about the botanical and sculptural features via a well-designed brochure and a mobile phone audio tour. The Missouri limestone wall (12,000 blocks) includes a large screen for video art curated by local museums; it also periodically shows classic movies. The park is lit at night and specially illuminated in winter.

Citygarden's ambitious site design and sculpture, ongoing programs, and indoor as well as outdoor facilities have changed both the fabric of downtown St. Louis and its demography. Some features, including the diverse backgrounds of the 23 artists, may allude to the cultural mix that has contributed to the city since its founding – as well as to populations working today to revive the urban landscape with new ways of thinking.

– Jan Garden Castro