

July 1, 2009

Citygarden opens to rave reviews — and much splashing

BY JOE MILNER, BEACON INTERN

Build it and they will come? Most definitely.

Citygarden, which opened today, was full of curious visitors ready to explore. Even skeptics came away with enthusiastic reviews.

The downtown urban park, a partnership between the city and the nonprofit Gateway Foundation, has transformed two city blocks with a collection of fountains, plants and sculptures. Citygarden is between 8th Street to the east and 10th Street to the west, and Chestnut Street to the north and Market Street to the south.

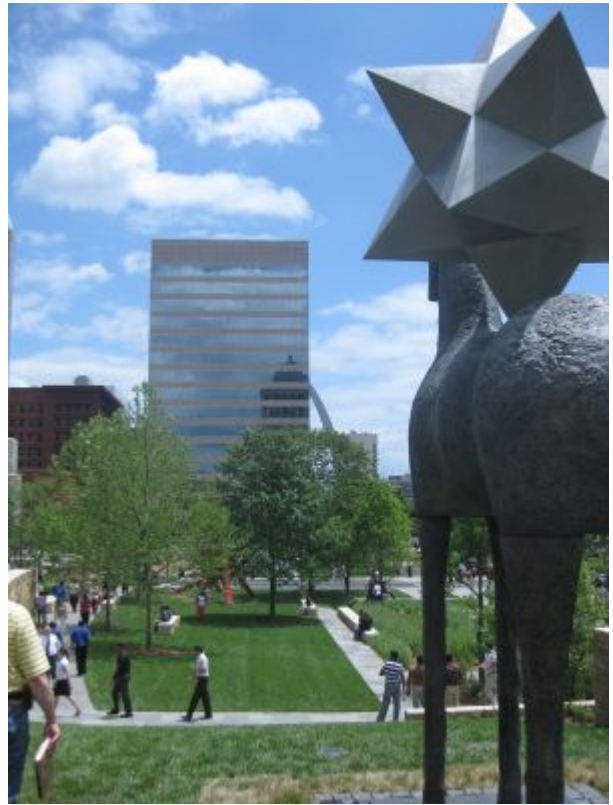
How the CityGarden grows — an appreciation, with slideshow

"It exceeds my expectations," said Gary Tetley, who grew up in University City and worked downtown until recently. "This is what St. Louis has needed for a long time."

As he talked, Tetley sat on an untitled stainless steel sculpture by Martin Puryear.

At play in the garden





PHOTOS BY JOE MILNER | BEACON INTERN

Other features of the park became instant favorites as well. Visitors gathered to inspect the inside of Igor Mitoraj's Eros Bendato, instantly dubbed "The Head." Children stomped or floated through a split-level basin, its waterfall drowning out the noise of the traffic beyond the park. Others ran through and kicked at fountains in the spray plaza. The 102 computer-controlled nozzles kept them guessing and then shot streams of water when they let down their guards.

"It's awesome, a great addition to downtown in general," said Rocky Olds as he sat with his wife, Missy, and watched daughters Kiersten and Faith scamper around the fountains.

He described the park as a nice place to relax and appreciated its laid-back attitude. "I think it's kind of cool, less restrictions," he said, referring to the absence of signs prohibiting visitors from playing in the fountains or climbing on the sculptures.

Olds says he learned about the project because he and his wife work at AT&T, whose office sits along the park's northern side. "I work on the 8th floor, and I'd look down, watching. They did a heck of a job on it."

Tami Harrison, Ashley Idecker and Angie Hewitt, who work at the Bank of America on the opposite side of the park, sat along a low wall eating lunch. "It was just open space before," Harrison commented. In contrast, she found the new park "calming."

"We plan to come to eat lunch here everyday. Weather permitting," she laughed.

Wankeeta Jackson, who lives on 9th St., also saw Citygarden as an improvement. "This is definitely ten times what it was a year and a half ago. I could see myself, when I go for walks, walking specifically here."

At the same time, she wished similar beautification would occur in other parts of the city. In north city, for example, "there's not a whole lot people can look at and enjoy," she said. "There's not a lot of fixing up of the areas like what's going on down here."

Tetley was also critical of the city's past efforts at improvement. "I was here when they started the Gateway Mall, and I was opposed to that," he explained. "The buildings that were here were worth preserving."

St. Louisans have long criticized the Mall for its perceived failures. Citygarden's [website](#) describes its location as once "vacant lawn space, devoid of visual interest and human activity." Challengers such as Tetley believe that other features of the old project continue to act as barriers downtown.

"I'm a preservationist at heart, but I would gladly destroy that thing if I had the chance," he said, pointing to the Gateway One building. A Gateway Foundation report entitled "[Gateway Mall: Form + Function](#)" listed Gateway One as one of the challenges faced in realizing the Mall's potential.

However, Tetley is pleased with the improvements brought by Citygarden. He particularly liked the new perspectives it offers. "You can go anywhere in this two-block area and find views of the buildings around here that are just extremely interesting."

While Tetley enjoyed looking at the city, Jackson pointed out her own new interest. "There's a waterfall, and people can get in and walk around, I haven't done that yet," she said. When asked if she would explore it, she smiled. "Probably, I have my flip-flops on."

Joe Milner, an intern at the Beacon, will be a junior at Brown University. To reach him, contact Beacon features and commentary editor [Donna Korando](#).