

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Sunday, June 28, 2009

Spectacular Citygarden is Opening on Schedule in St. Louis

BY DAVID BONETTI

ST. LOUIS — Surrounded by office towers that house some 12,000 workers, Citygarden, the spectacular new urban sculpture park that opens Wednesday, creates a front yard for a downtown that has lacked a people-friendly focal point.

Citygarden occupies 2.9 acres on the Gateway Mall bordered by Eighth and 10th streets and Market and Chestnut streets. It will be free and open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

It is the creation of the St. Louis-based Gateway Foundation, which is paying for Citygarden's \$25 million to \$30 million construction cost. The foundation also purchased and owns all the works of art, estimated to cost at least \$12 million. The city, which owns the land and made the site improvements, will be responsible for the cost of the park's water and electricity.

"The city is absolutely thrilled," said Barbara Geisman, deputy mayor for development. "They've made a wonderful gift to the city."

For years, the Gateway Mall had been an unattractive space that created a barrier between the north and south halves of downtown, Geisman said. Two years ago, Mayor Francis Slay sought the foundation's help in making a master plan for the site; when it was completed, the foundation offered to put it into effect.

Citygarden's Amenities

Water features:

- An 180-foot-long basin with a waterfall
- A subtle scrim of water washing over a tilted granite disc that serves as the base of a sculpture
- An interactive spray fountain with 102 nozzles that shoots water up to 6 feet high where children can play.

Plant material:

Extensive plantings, all native to the region and chosen with the advice of the Missouri Botanical Garden, which will care for them, including:

- 240 trees
- 1,100 shrubs
- 4,000 perennials
- 8,000 bulbs
- 13,000 groundcover plants

Also:

- The Terrace View, a restaurant-cafe run by Jim Fiala of Liluma in the Central West End, the Crossing in Clayton and Acero in Maplewood.
- A video wall, where art videos programmed by area art institutions will play.

The opening was scheduled to coincide with other downtown developments, including the All-Star Game and Ballpark Village, a complex of shops, restaurants and offices just outside the stadium. But as with many visions, it didn't turn out that way. Ballpark Village was not built, and the prime real estate it was to occupy now holds a softball field and a parking lot. And, as the recession grinds on, few new businesses have dared to sprout downtown.

But the Gateway Foundation delivered — in spectacular fashion. Geisman hopes the urban sculpture park will spur additional redevelopment downtown.

FISCHER CONNECTION

The Gateway Foundation, founded in St. Louis in 1986 by the late Aaron and Teresa Fischer, has left its cultural imprint throughout the metropolitan area: It has installed 25 other sculptures, illuminated public buildings including the Gateway Arch and the Missouri History Museum and constructed playgrounds. It also funds the Great Rivers Biennial for area artists at the Contemporary Art Museum. Four Fischer family members serve on the board of the foundation, which operates in an unassuming office on Olive Street downtown.

In addition to 24 works of sculpture by international artists both famous and little-known, Citygarden's extensive landscaping with native plants, shaded pathways and soothing water features makes it not simply a sculpture garden, "but an urban oasis with sculpture," said Gateway spokesman Paul Wagman.

The sculptors include past masters such as Aristide Maillol, Fernand Leger, Niki de Saint Phalle and George Rickey, those currently at the top of their games such as Mark di Suvero, Martin Puryear, Tom Otterness and Bernar Venet, and a number of little-known artists who might become the stars of tomorrow.

All of this has been put together by landscape architect Warren Byrd of Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects of Charlottesville, Va.

"The challenge was what kind of armature or framework to use to create both a grandness of scope and the intimacy necessary for the installation of individual works of sculpture," Byrd said. "Although the site was pretty blank, we looked into its history, its broader context. We ended up using the great rivers that define the region to structure the design conceptually."

RIVER THEME

Byrd has divided the two square blocks into three long zones running east-west parallel to Market and Chestnut streets.

The northern zone, running alongside Chestnut, represents river bluffs. An arcing 550-foot-long wall that rises from 4 to 12 feet in height raises the upper level above the two other zones. On the upper level, the park's restaurant offers views of the garden. Constructed of honey-colored limestone blocks quarried just an hour downriver from the city, the wall features a waterfall.

The central zone is inspired by the flood plain. The lowest element in the park, it features rain gardens that absorb runoff. Large native shade and specimen trees are planted here, and the larger sculptures are installed in this flat area of the garden.

The southern zone represents a cultivated urban garden, albeit one in a river ecology. A meandering 1,100-foot-long wall that serves as seating is reminiscent of the serpentine paths area river tributaries cut through the landscape, which Byrd saw from the air flying into St. Louis. The most formal element of the design, an allee of ginkgo trees along Market Street, defines the garden's southern border.

Citygarden was designed to be ecologically responsible, using native plants throughout. Water from the fountains will be recycled, and rainwater captured and filtered. The roofs of the restaurant and maintenance sheds are covered with sedum plants, designed to help reduce energy costs and give workers in surrounding offices a greener view. Large, mature plants were used so the park would immediately be attractive to visitors. Nearly half the garden will be in shade to make it appealing on St. Louis' hot and humid summer days.