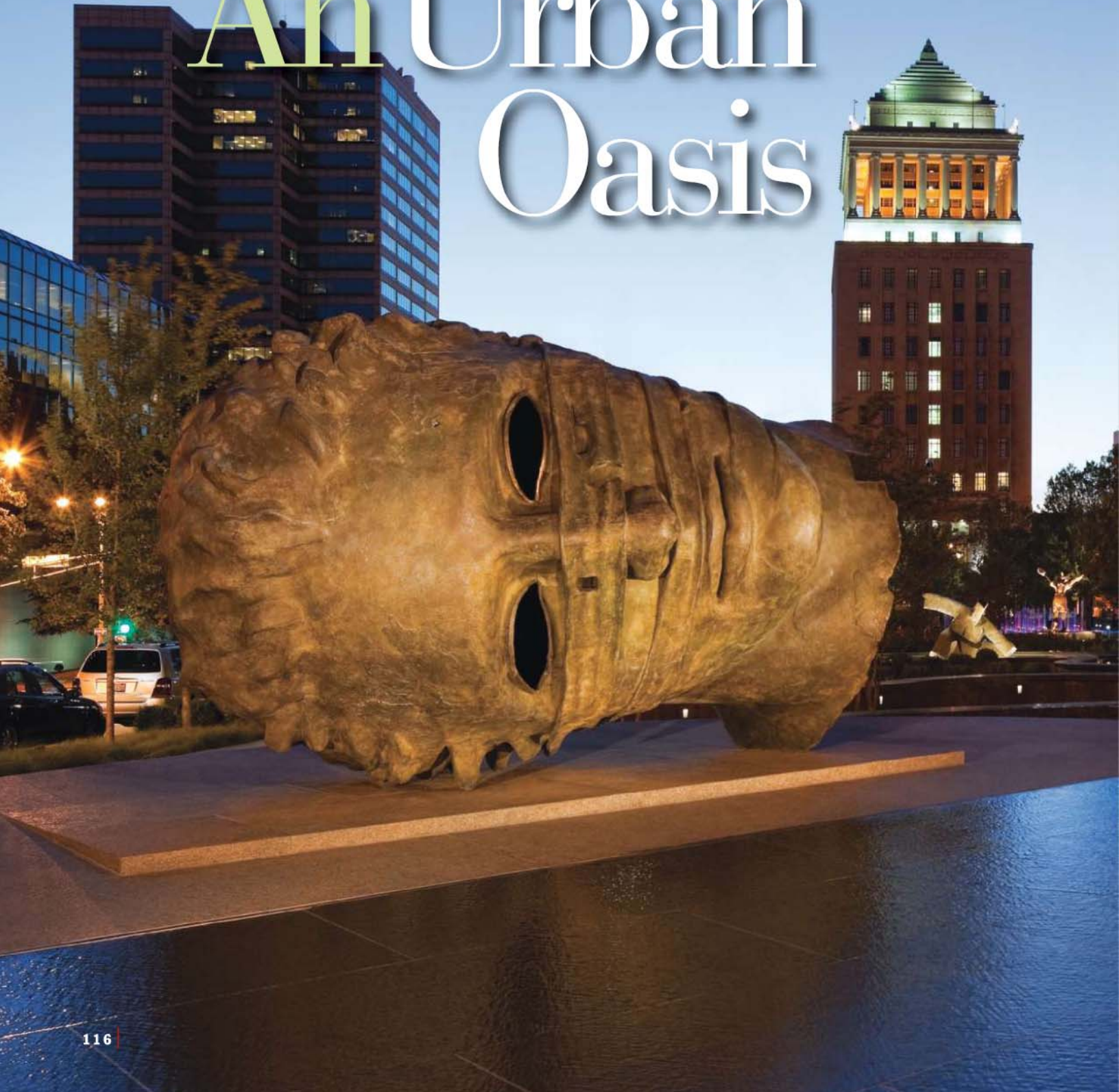


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Creating An Urban Oasis





Igor Mitoraj's decapitated head, *Eros Bound*, greets visitors arriving at Citygarden's southeast corner. Lighting of park features enhances visits in the evening.

A new hybrid urban landscape gives fresh momentum to a city's renewal.

By George Hazelrigg, ASLA



WHEN ST. LOUIS launched an ambitious downtown revitalization campaign a decade ago, its action plan identified a 1.2-mile-long, east–west row of sparsely landscaped, mostly vacant city-owned blocks, tagged the “Gateway Mall,” as a priority for development. In early 2007, after several other priorities were tackled first, Mayor Francis Slay announced the selection of a design team to prepare a new master plan for the mall (see “Meet Me [Again] in St. Louis, Louis,” *Landscape Architecture*, October 2008).

The announcement caused little stir. After all, this was not the first time a mall plan would be prepared; mall proposals date back to the city’s 1907 master plan and continued to be made intermittently up through the 1980s. Plans of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s lapsed for lack of adequate funding with only partial improvements resulting. The mall remained an unfulfilled century-old dream, the

victim of a history of incoherent planning and lack of a consistent concept of what the mall was actually to accomplish. In addition, a loss of more than 500,000 residents between 1950 and 2000, which had left behind a downtown of deserted streets and run-down buildings, had spawned a good number of naysayers.

In June 2007, however, the mayor had another announcement. The private St. Louis-based Gateway Foundation was going to

An aerial view of Citygarden looking toward the northwest, *above*, highlights the 550-foot-long arced limestone wall, a 1,100-foot-long granite “meander wall,” and the imposing AT&T buildings to the north. A final labeled plan drawing, *opposite top*, shows Citygarden’s division into three east–west bands and its bifurcation in the middle by Ninth Street, which is closed to vehicles during the park’s active times. On the west side, a spray plaza with 102 vertical jets, *opposite bottom*, draws crowds of children on hot days. The City Courts building is at the western end.

COURTESY GATEWAY FOUNDATION. PHOTOGRAPHER STEVE HALL. HEDRICH BLESSING PHOTOGRAPHERS



Citygarden will be open year-round, with no perimeter barriers and no fees.



NELSON BYRD WOLTZ LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, TOP; COURTESY OF ARCTURIS, PHOTOGRAPHER DEBBIE FRANK, BOTTOM





The goal was to create a hybrid “oasis,” both botanic garden and city park.

finance the design and construction of a “world-class sculpture garden” on the mall between Eighth and Tenth streets. In addition, it planned to place 24 pieces of nationally and internationally renowned sculpture on the site and would pay all ongoing costs of the garden except for electricity and water that the city would provide. Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects (NBWLA) in Charlottesville, Virginia, was selected as the project’s designers.

That announcement got attention. Something new was finally going to be built on a two-block, 2.9-acre site identified as “urban garden” on the new mall master plan. The private, family-owned Gateway Foundation already had a long history of supporting the arts in the region, including the acquisition and installation of world-class public art throughout the metro area. The estimated costs of the garden through construction would be \$25 to \$30 million. Ground was broken in April 2008; the buzz among the

The arc wall has a 40-foot break, *opposite*, through which a waterfall cascades six feet from the upper level of a 180-by-60-foot split-level water basin. Visitors entering the park from the east encounter a large sculpture by Bernar Venet, *above*, a crowd favorite with adults and climbing children. The arc wall with the waterfall in the background separates the park’s upper “river bluffs” band and the central “floodplain” band. The view south from the upper terrace, *right*, shows the section of the split-level water basin in front of the café that hosts Aristide Maillol’s reclining *La Rivière*.





region's residents grew as the site's new topography and hardscape features took shape. After 15 months of complex construction, installations, and plantings, Citygarden opened to the public on July 1, 2009, two weeks before the annual Major League All-Star game was held two blocks away at Busch Stadium.

At a morning on-site ceremony for the media the day before, the construction fences around the site were removed. Henceforth, Citygarden would be open year-round, with no perimeter barriers and no fees. Even before the garden officially opened the next day, some downtown residents arrived with beach towels to relax and watch their kids frolic on an interactive spray plaza. Visitors who streamed to the garden in the following days applauded its accessibility, the absence of "do not touch" signs, and the spectacular stonework, native plantings, and water features.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorialized that Citygarden seemed "poised to become one of those rare St. Louis places for all seasons" ...and its "appeal reaches across generations." The garden teemed with visitors from early morning until late evening, with an added onslaught during the week of events surrounding the All-Star game. Even with the resumption of school and the arrival of fall weather, the garden remained popular, with people enjoy-

ing the sculpture, a kaleidoscope of changing plant colors, and opportunities for quiet walks or to join friends at the garden's upper terrace café.

Syndicated columnist Neal Peirce, who has tracked downtown St. Louis's evolution for more than a decade, wrote in September, "For St. Louis, for years so forsaken its downtown had the feel of a big and mostly empty living room, the public's warm embrace of Citygarden caps a remarkable comeback decade which has seen the center city draw 5,000 (new) residents and more than \$4 billion in new investment."

From day one, the goal of the Gateway Foundation was to create a hybrid "oasis," both botanic garden and city park. Although originally described as a sculpture garden, it was instead to be a garden-park that would host a diverse collection of modern and contemporary sculpture. Emphasis would be put on ensuring

Visitors admire George Rickey's *Four Rectangles Oblique* as they stand in front of one of the two larger east-west rain gardens, above. A 16-inch-deep pool carved out of the spray plaza's side, opposite, is shared by children with Jean-Michel Folon's *Voyage*. Kan Yasuda's 16-foot-high *Door of Return* is located on the spray plaza's northern edge.

COURTESY GATEWAY FOUNDATION. PHOTOGRAPHER STEVE HALL. HEDRICH BLESSING PHOTOGRAPHERS

The garden's sculpture can be freely touched and, where feasible, climbed upon.

Citygarden's openness, a mix of shade and water to accommodate the city's hot summers, and a range of experiences that would provide something for everyone. It was to be a place for fun, a place to enjoy and interact with.

The site offered major challenges. In addition to an uninspiring flat lawn surface, it was surrounded by tall office buildings with no ground-level retail; "one of the most unintelligible urban landscapes in the nation," decried one local critic. The sight line to the city's iconic Gateway Arch, some six blocks to the east, was partially obscured by a tall office building constructed in the 1980s, the sole visible reminder of an earlier aborted and arguably misguided plan to redevelop several blocks of the mall. It also posed innumerable construction challenges. The push to ready the garden by the All-Star game added pressure. According to general contractor BSI Constructors Inc., 400 truckloads of underground debris were removed and 13 miles of electrical, plumbing, and sewer lines were installed.

Last October, NBWLA principal Warren Byrd, FASLA, reflected on his initial impressions the first time he visited the site. One, he said, was what a great location it had, being close to the Arch, the Civil Courts building, and so well centered within the city's downtown. There was also a certain forlornness to the struggling site. Byrd recognized, however, that the immediate surroundings

could be a reasonable backdrop to allow Citygarden to establish its own presence and identity.

The city's regional geography, notably its two great rivers—the Mississippi and the Missouri—and their tributaries and limestone outcrops, informed the design from the beginning, as did the downtown's urban grid and mapped reminders of earlier property lines, building foundation walls, and alleyways. During an on-site interview last July, Byrd said that one lesson learned from the experience was not to try to force your design, but rather to look as deep as you can into the locale and the region. "If you bring these out," he said, "you can do some pretty remarkable things."

Early on, the design team decided on a tripartite division of the garden into east–west bands. The northern "river bluffs" band consists of a series of urban terraces beginning at the site's eastern end, where the park's café extends into a terrace with pool overlooking the lower garden. It ends at the site's highest point, a "mound" reaching 10 feet above street level at the western end and covered with 70 river birch trees. Scarlet oak trees line Chestnut Street along the garden's northern edge; a row of honey locust trees will provide shade to the restaurant terrace. Willow oaks adorn a lower "night terrace." The café, designed by St. Louis architect Phil Durham, is a Miesian "glass box" pavilion with a sedum-covered green roof, indoor and outdoor seating for 120 plus a bar,



COURTESY GATEWAY FOUNDATION. PHOTOGRAPHER STEVE HALL. HEDRICH BLESSING PHOTOGRAPHERS

and Mediterranean-accented local food served by one of the city's most innovative restaurateurs. An unobtrusive maintenance building along Chestnut Street also has a sedum green roof.

The more parklike middle "floodplain" band includes lawn areas, many of the larger sculptures and specimen trees, and two large gardens. An interactive spray plaza, 120 feet long by 36 feet wide, has 102 vertical jets shooting water up to six or more feet high in computer-controlled changing patterns. The water jets are lit and colored at night. A separate 16-inch-deep pool, carved out of the side of the plaza, contains a small sculpture by Belgian artist Jean-Michel Folon. Both the spray plaza and the pool are like magnets drawing crowds of children (and some adventurous adults) on hot summer days. Water in the plaza is recycled through an underground computerized filtration and cleaning system that minimizes the use of chemicals.



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During the winter months, 24 plastic globes, 22 inches in diameter, have been randomly installed around the plaza. At night, the globes are lit by the LED lights in each spray jet, the colors programmed to change every three minutes.

An imposing 550-foot-long arced wall runs east–west the length of Citygarden. Evoking the region’s river bluffs, the wall separates the northern band and the central “floodplain” and ties the two blocks of the garden together. At night, the powerful presence of the lighted arc wall is all the more spectacular.

Near the café to the east, the wall intersects a split-level 180-foot-long by 20-foot-wide water basin. The upper portion is a calm pool featuring Aristide Maillol’s *La Rivière*; the lower portion is a limestone boulder-filled basin fed by a waterfall that dramatically cascades six feet from the upper level through a 40-foot-wide break in the arc wall. Like the spray plaza, the waterfall and lower basin are popular with children; the waterfall itself muffles the sound of nearby street noise.

In the western block, the arc wall frames a 10-foot-long LED video wall that will play continuous video art curated on a quarterly basis by four of the city’s leading museums.

A stepped outcrop of limestone blocks serves as foreground and recalls the stone’s quarried origin.

A “meander wall” of polished granite, 1,100 feet in length and running east–west, separates the central “floodplain” from the southern cultivated “River Terrace” band. The wall’s path along the zone’s rectangular planting beds mimics the path of a river winding through regional farmland. It serves as a seat wall and creates additional spaces for socializing or contemplation. Along Citygarden’s southern border at Market Street is an allée of 70 ginkgo trees, someday hopefully to be part of a longer allée extending along the entire east–west length of the Gateway Mall.

Located at the park’s southeast corner, Polish sculptor Igor Mitoraj’s large decapitated head, *Eros Bendato* (*Eros Bound*), lies on its side, atop a tilted granite disk mostly covered by a thin scrim of water. The garden offers easy access along its entire perimeter, and the head instantly became a crowd favorite, frequented by couples and families taking photographs and children climbing inside the head and peering out through Eros’s vacant eyes.

The site’s two blocks remain divided by Ninth Street. The city declined to close the north–south street permanently, but, at least for the early months, it was closed from midmorning to 10:00 PM, and later when there were evening games at the nearby ballpark. In Citygarden’s ear-

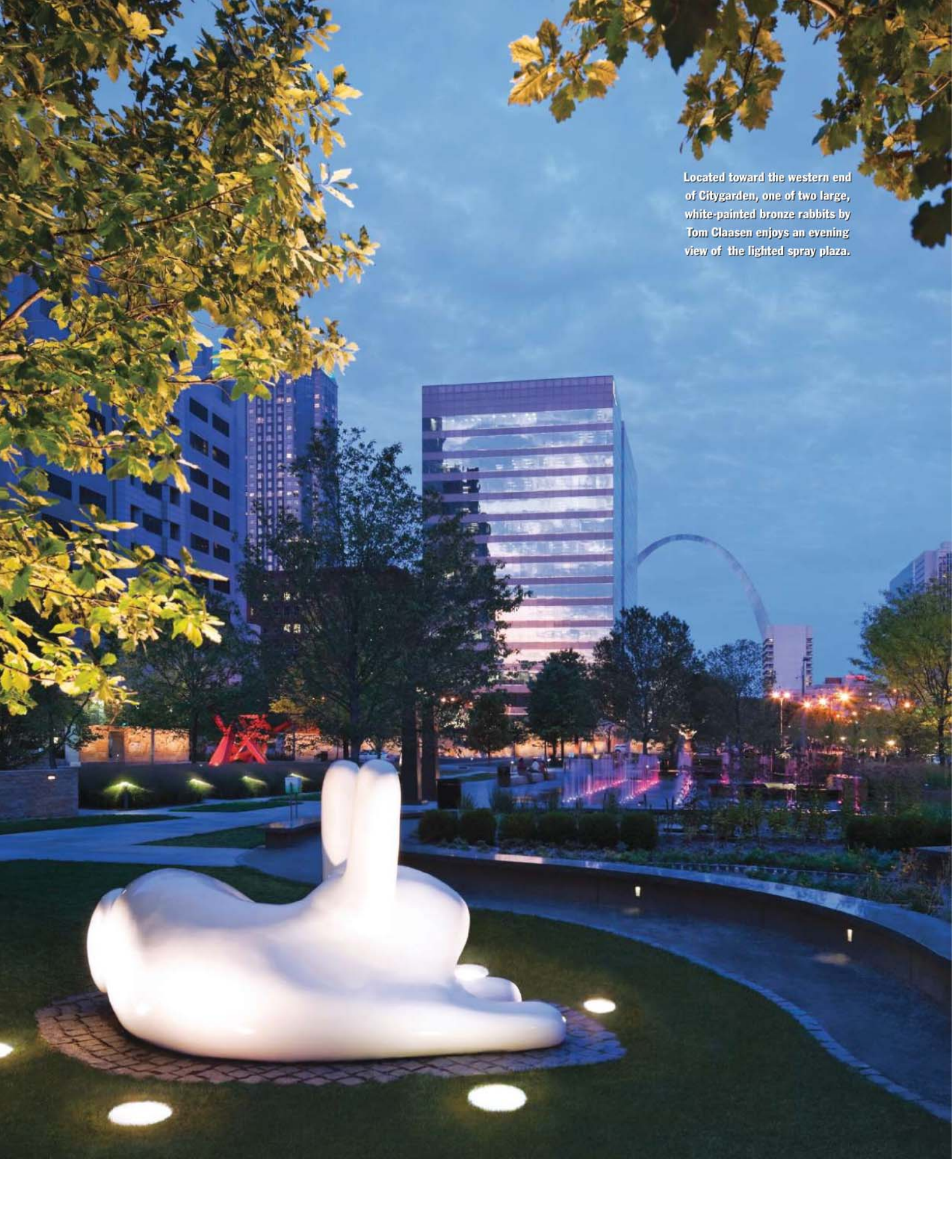
ly months, Ninth Street did not appear to be a serious impediment. In addition to the daytime closures, the street was narrowed and does have several pavement changes. More important, the garden’s two blocks of diverse spaces and opportunities are effectively tied together by the powerful east–west arc wall and meander wall. A visitor standing at Ninth Street is very conscious of these unifying features.

The two dozen works of sculpture placed in Citygarden offer a rich menu for park visitors. The foundation’s board, including several current and past leaders from the city’s top museums and the regional Laumeier Sculpture Park, and the NBWLA team put considerable effort into the siting of each individual work. The park’s landscape makes each work seem comfortable, not only in its designated location but also in its relationship to adjacent works. Despite the diversity of the sculpture in medium, style, and size, there are no clashes between pieces, no sense of something unneeded or contrived. The sculpture is everywhere, but there is no sense of crowding except perhaps for a piece by Niki de Saint Phalle resting in the middle of the café’s indoor dining space. Even more unusual, the garden’s sculpture can be freely touched and, where feasible, climbed upon.

Citygarden offers visitors an audio tour of the sculpture that can be accessed by cell phones. The narrative on each work and its artist

In warm weather, visitors can enjoy a relaxed meal at Citygarden’s popular Terrace View restaurant, opposite top. Citygarden’s meander wall, opposite bottom, separates the southern “river terrace” band from the central “floodplain” band, provides seating for visitors, and forms spaces for planting beds. Keith Haring’s *Ringed Figure*, right, stands at the western end of an allée of 70 ginkgo trees running along the southern edge of Market Street. The Gateway Arch and the Old Courthouse dome are visible in the background.





Located toward the western end of Citygarden, one of two large, white-painted bronze rabbits by Tom Claassen enjoys an evening view of the lighted spray plaza.

is provided by a different local sports, cultural, or civic celebrity. In addition, area musicians collaborated on the composition and recording of original music to accompany the narratives.

The Missouri Botanical Garden worked closely with the design team in selecting the garden's diversity of plants and will continue to consult on the garden's maintenance. The foundation has also contracted with a local arborist to closely monitor the trees for the first two years. Whenever possible, plantings are native to Missouri and include many that offer multiseasonal interest. Where some of the larger trees (six-inch caliper and above) could not be found in the St. Louis region, they were acquired in the Kansas City area, Illinois, Tennessee, and New Jersey. The garden's plant list includes more than 1,100 shrubs, more than 4,000 perennials and native grasses, almost 13,000 ground-cover plants, and some 8,000 bulbs.

Mature trees were specified, not only to provide an established appearance from the outset, but also to address such issues of scale as the heights of some sculptures at 10 feet or more, and of the tall buildings flanking the site. Together, the elevated terraces of the northern band and the selection of mature trees soften the potential distraction of the massive buildings just across Chestnut Street. In addition to providing essential shade during the city's hot summers, the location of each tree was carefully determined so as to frame and complement the garden's sculpture and hardscape features as well as to shape views of the surrounding city. Each quadrant of Citygarden has a different seasonal focus and will highlight plants that bloom or otherwise stand out in that season.

Anticipating inevitable compaction and drainage issues, the designers and their consultants mapped the entire site for required soil types. In the end, three soil types emerged: soil for use with trees planted in hardscaped areas, an engineered soil for the garden areas and rain gardens, and a sand-soil mix for the fescue lawns. With the exception of the river birch trees on the northwest hill, most trees have their own individual drain pipes that lead to one of six rain gardens as well as a four-inch-diameter pipe delivering air to the tree's roots.

An estimated two-thirds of the site drains into the six rain gardens. In addition to the two larger ones running east-west in the center band, four smaller gardens run north-south on the edges of Ninth Street, collecting both nearby landscape drainage and some street runoff. For the restaurant terrace area, a cast-in-place pier and structural slab system was used to facilitate root growth; in the lower Night Terrace area, smaller granite pavers were installed atop a slab in which drain holes have been drilled. Additional runoff drains to the planting beds of several willow oaks.

Despite the crowds that visited the park during its first two summer months, most of the garden held up well. Exceptions were the turf areas; most have been resodded or reseeded. In addition, rabbits began to take their toll on selected perennials, prompting some changes to more "rabbit-resistant" species.

City leaders do believe that the garden will prompt additional investors to select other blocks of the Gateway Mall to develop.

Standing in Citygarden today, it is hard to believe that in the early 1980s, the western block hosted several buildings, including a Western Union and a Kentucky Fried Chicken. The eastern block served as a surface parking lot. By the decade's end, the two blocks had been razed and converted into a bland landscape similar to much of the mall to the west. While optimism grew among residents as construction proceeded, few could have been prepared for the transformation of the garden that opened last year. And this raises another question. After a century, would this develop-

ment of two uninspiring blocks of the mall finally lead the way to realizing the full potential for Gateway Mall?

City leaders do believe that the garden will prompt additional investors to select other blocks of the Gateway Mall to develop. According to Tricia Roland-Hamilton, director of the Gateway Mall project, Citygarden has indeed generated interest, and the next mall area to be developed likely will be several blocks to the west, named the "Civic Room" in the new master plan. It will accommodate large festivals, fundraisers, concerts, and other civic events.

Planners hope that transformation of the mall's entire length as a vibrant public space will likewise spur new retail and residential development in its vicinity and serve to tie the northern and southern sides of downtown together. [LAW](#)

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PROJECT CREDITS **Client:** Gateway Foundation, St. Louis. **Landscape architect:** Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects, Charlottesville, Virginia (Warren Byrd, FASLA; Sara Myhre; Breck Gastinger; Mary Wolf; Jeremy Jordon; and Paul Posey). **Architect:** Studio Durham Architects, St. Louis (Phil Durham, Darcia Thomas, and Greg Worley). **General contractor:** BSI Constructors, St. Louis (Paul McLeane and Doug Hawkins). **MEP:** Ross & Baruzzini, St. Louis (Paul Carmen). **Civil and structural:** Frontenac Engineering, St. Louis (Steve Miller and Mohamed Al Harash). **Sculpture lighting:** Randy Burkett Lighting Design (Randy Burkett and Susan Jenning). **Electric contractor:** Kaiser Electric, Granite City, Illinois. **Site lighting:** Fischer Marantz Stone, New York. **Site masonry:** Leonard Masonry, St. Louis (Steve Schulte). **Arc wall masonry:** Kirkwood Masonry, St. Louis (Steele Crissman and Dan Head). **Masonry supplier (arc wall):** Earthworks Group Inc., St. Louis. **Fountains:** Hydro Dramatics, St. Louis (Kerry Friedman). **Irrigation:** Irrigation Resource Management Inc., St. Louis (Steve Niehoff). **Soil and subdrainage:** Jeffrey L. Bruce & Co., Kansas City, Missouri (Jeffrey L. Bruce, FASLA). **Sculpture structural:** Larson Engineering, St. Louis (Ted Pruess). **Sculpture installation:** Acme Erectors, St. Louis (Aron Clay). **Plantings:** Landesign, Wentzville, Missouri. **Large tree supplier:** Environmental Design, Tomball, Texas. **Horticultural consultant:** Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis (Jim Cocos and June Hutson). **Client's adviser:** Arc-turis, St. Louis (Sara Runge).