

Interview With Bill Jirousek

“You say you want to talk about building a garden in the CCG. First I want to distinguish between those gardens that are established already, those that are established but you cannot see, and those that are in the process of being established. To have an established garden means that it’s been approved by the City of Cleveland (city Council). Say for instance, the Italian Garden, it’s legally established, it exists and it is being taken care of. It’s there. The Scottish Garden has been legally established, the lines are drawn, City Council has said these are the parameters of the garden. And so no other group can nudge into that area. But you won’t see anything in the Scottish Garden. There is no sign. There’s no flag or flowers. But they are working on it. Now the Hispanic garden is a step before that. They are working towards becoming established. They have to decide where they’d like to put their garden. They have to take it through the whole...labyrinth is really what it is...the labyrinth of the city process. And it’ll take about three months. That’s reasonable. It’ll take about that long. And once the garden has been approved, planting, and the signs can be put up, and we can begin some structure.”

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your background?

He was born in Cleveland. Been at the Sculpture Center for ten years. Mom is Italian. Dad is Bohemian, which is now known as Czechoslovakian. He talks about names of countries and political borders changing over the last one hundred years. *“One garden that is very interesting is the Rusin Garden. There was never any such place. It was a place in the Carthinogen (?) Mountains which was always a ball that bounced back and forth between the different countries that surrounded it. There was never officially a country, yet the people of that area always felt a oneness among themselves. And they felt that so strong that when they came here they still considered themselves Rusins. They didn’t consider themselves Polish, or Czech, or German or others. “*

2. When and how did you first become involved with the Cleveland Cultural Garden?

“Because the Sculpture Center has been involved with an inventory of all publicly accessible outdoor sculpture in the state and fundraising for restoring and conserving the sculptures, particularly in the city of Cleveland. I have had a long interest in the Cultural Gardens. I became active personally spending my own time on them about three years ago. And now I am delegate for the American Colonial Garden and also chair of three committees: Design and Preservation; The Leo Wiedenthal Endowment fund, which is in some ways the financial committee for the Cultural Gardens; and also the Liberty Row Project, which is a real interesting story. Liberty Row is a series of 833 bronze markers commemorating Cuyahoga County servicemen who died in World War I. The medallions are about 6 or 7 inches in diameter, set into the ground right about ground level along with an oak tree originally in 1918, maybe all the way into the 1930’s when the last ones were installed. Physically they run from the railroad tracks around the north end of the cultural gardens almost at the lake, through the Cultural Gardens, Rockefeller Park, through University Circle, up the hill. Then follows South Park and

North Park to within almost a block of Warrensville Center Rd. So these medallions are on both sides of the streets with their oak trees, and in a lot o cases there are local people who have placed small American flags next to them. “

“ I was in a unique position. One, knowing that they existed because a lot of people don't, ...I was able to enlist the help of art history students. In particular, one from CWRU, who needed a project and this really interested her. Also, I was aware of a local metal detector club, which I contacted the president of and it really caught his attention. Not only enjoying finding things, but he is in the Reserves and will be going on active duty next year. And Eric was very interested in this because military history is important to him. So the club will actually be going out to help us find those medallions that are sunken in the ground, covered with grass, and even roots in some cases. One weekend this month we will be going out there to complete a database telling names of serviceman from Cuyahoga county who died in World War I, rank, unit attachment, city they lived in (all of which we don't have yet)...most probably from Cleveland....There are about eleven of these medallions in storage at the Cleveland Convention Center. Which we inventoried last week. But them we will know which are missing.

“I talked to someone at the Naval Reserve. He was very interested (in the project). I talked with the commander of the Seabees. They'll do the concrete work. They'll dig the holes and plant the new medallions. I talked with a professional conservator who is also an artist and he said, I didn't even ask him, but he said "I'll make the medallions." I told him there might be 400 of them.. He said 'Let's see'. So he is willing to do that and we'll probably be able to get others to help that way. Every way I turn on this I find someone who wants to help. So all we need to do is coordinate and that's my role here. For me, If we can just keep working together we will be able to restore the memorial and be able to remind folks that it is there and....remember. That's real important.”

3. Can you explain the role of the Sculpture Center in the CCG?

The Sculpture Center does not have a formal role. As soon as anything is installed in a garden, it becomes the City of Cleveland's property. At that time the Sculpture Center may, through their contract with the city, maintain and preserve sculptures.

“Because it belongs to the City of Cleveland, that's where the Sculpture Center comes in...where our interest begins. Those objects that we have been involved with conserving, and then maintaining, ...they meet certain criteria. One, they must be original sculptures by an artist...”

“There are probably 120 to 150 objects in the CCG that meet our criteria construed as sculptural or 3-dimensional. About only 30 of them right now meet the criteria for the inventories. And those are the pieces that the Sculpture Center can help out on...take care of. We have not yet begun a project on any of the Gardens. But we are working towards that. The Czech community recently restored a piece that they have of the first Czech president, Masaric, (?). It's restored and we are going to train both the delegates and the members of that community in it s routine maintenance, which is really just washing and waxing similar to what any of us ought to be doing with our cars once a year. If they wash and wax it'll last a long time. So we'd like to train them and anybody else from any of the other gardens. But what we'd really like to do is help groups raise

funds and choose conservators in their gardens also.” Bill then makes a distinction between between his free time when he volunteers at the CCG and his job at the Sculpture Center. He wanted to make sure the name of the federation is the ‘Cleveland Cultural Garden Federation’, not ‘Gardens’ (no ‘s’ on the end).

4. Why do you personally donate so much of your time at the gardens.

“Sometimes the people are just right. And I find the folks at the CCG a really unique bunch. They are second generation, sometimes first generation from their native countries. They are very interesting folks who care deeply about their families, their communities, and the countries they came from and the CCGF...It’s the people that really drew me in. ‘...’”

5. Can you briefly explain the steps necessary for an ethnic group to have a garden established in the CCG?

“When an ethnic community would like to begin the process of establishing a garden, they will first, whether by chance or on purpose, attend a Cultural Garden Federation meeting. When they see it is something they like to be a part of they will submit some sort of informal application, even verbal, to start with. Once that happens we begin working with them as an organization. We ask that any garden has its own non-profit support organization that will raise funds for the garden, speak for the garden and do the work...But they will submit a plan to the Federation which would include a request for a particular plot of land within the Gardens. And one of the things we are working on right now is to come up with a list of all the potential sites and prioritize them. It may be that the Federation would like to expand a little north or south or fill in some areas where some gardens are not linked. So we may as a Federation suggest where a new group should establish a garden. And there are a lot of good sites left. But once they do formally begin the process we ask that they bring a landscape designer into their group to draw the garden as they would like to see it be built – given what the property will accommodate. Once they’ve submitted that and it goes through the Art and Preservation Committee (artists and art historians and landscape designers) and the Committee feels they are doing everything they ought to be doing as far as the design, it gets passed onto the Federation board for their approval. Once the Federation approves it the group can then submit it to the director of Parks and Recreation Properties and their requests and drawings will pass through a number of departments in the city ending with the issuance of a building permit. They can then continue with fundraising and begin preparing the site including walls, walkways, steps, plazas, and sculptures.”

6. Based upon your experiences and observations do you personally have any advice for groups wishing to establish a garden in the CCG?

“Speaking personally. For example the Hispanic community. It is a large community and it is not one – homogenous – group. There could be as many as thirty different countries we could call Hispanic. They have to come together somehow. It would make it difficult for that group that, at the core, was doing all the work to establish a garden, if

another major group came in later and said "Yeah , but what about this? And what about that? And this should be included and this shouldn't" So it is important that any community, particularly those like the Hispanic community that have a number of different (ethnic) groups within it that they work together from the very beginning. I think there are maybe 3 major Hispanic organizations in the city that should be included in the planning. If all the major groups are not included that could really slow up or stop the process. "

"Other examples would be the Middle Eastern garden or the Arab American garden. There was a space established for the Syrian community in I think 1937 but a garden has not been developed there. Similar to the Scottish community. There is nothing in it but the space is there. It makes sense that it should be a larger group and a lot of people really have to come together."

7. Many of the Gardens were subject to severe vandalism in the 1960's and 70's. Is there anything you know of that is being done to help remedy that and to help prevent it in the future?

"the best I understand it is that it was in the late 60's and early 70's that a lot of objects, particularly bronze, were lost...."

"A couple parts to the answer. There are about eight to ten bronze pieces in storage at the Convention Center downtown and a number of plaster molds and positives of the original sculptures. They are there for safekeeping. We have them inventoried. We know what's there. There are for example 3 or 4 plaster busts of Finnish (heroes) and the Finnish community is planning on taking those plasters and casting new bronzes to replace those lost in the garden. The Polish community has also replace two pieces. One of Copernicus and one of Mr. Syncowtz and they have plans to replace three or four of their busts in their garden. One interesting observation. – The Polish busts were all three or four feet off the ground and not much bigger than life size. They were kind of easy to steal. Contrast that with those in the Czech garden that were 5 or 6 feet off the ground. Plus they are on heroic scale, very heavy, and very difficult to move. Sometimes it was just physically what could withstand the times..."

"The Ukranian community recently used fiberglass to replace some bronze busts. With all due respect to my Ukranian friends, bronze looks a lot better. Maybe from the street one can't tell, but fiberglass does not hold up well to the elements either. Small pores, small flaws, water can get in and freeze and break apart the surface of fiberglass where with bronze it is a whole lot less likely to happen. " the Soldiers and Sailors monument downtown is bronze and it still got damaged over time by the 'freeze-thaw' cycle' but it took a lot longer. "way to go."

"Fiberglass is easy to repair, but it just seems it is easier to replace in bronze. It's a personal bias but when you can afford it it's the way to go."

8. If you could add any sculpture to the CCG what would you add?

"We've talked about having a local historian advising us and the local ethnic groups what or who might be commemorated in their garden in the near future. Reason being that the CCG were established a long time ago and everything that was put there

originally is what is there now. So while maybe half the Gardens were established in the twenties and thirties nothing has been added since. Many people feel that there have been a few folks since that should be remembered. So the Federation would like to ask that question and see what is suggested. “

“To answer specifically....I don't know. One of the guidelines is that military figures generally included in the gardens. And often folks would like to commemorate military figures. But often times military figures may not be looked upon the same depending on what side someone was on in a conflict. “....

9. Would you make any changes to the CCG?

Maybe expand north or south. Continue adding more gardens.

10. What is your hope for the future of the CCG?

They are putting together a development plan. Follow through with a lighting plan for the CCG. They would like to work more with the city of Cleveland.

11. What about the security in the CCG?

He tells people to just go for a walk there and find out for themselves. No problems. Only minor things. More police. “One of the things I've been nudging for awhile is to have the mounted police on regular patrol go through there on a routine basis. They're fun and kids love them. They would add to the fun and the security of the park.”

“A lot of folks don't realize there is more to the gardens than the lower boulevard (MLK). There is also East Blvd. but a lot of folks never drive it and if they take a few extra minutes to ride the upper boulevard they will get a whole different view of all the Gardens. That front on that boulevard. It's slower. It's quieter. The homes along there are beautiful and beautifully kept up. It's pretty magical, really. The morning of One World Day I walked along that portion of East Boulevard and... it was beautiful! I had to ask myself – ‘Is this Cleveland’? Many of us don't realize how beautiful it really is....fountains flowing, flags waving in the breeze, people mowing their lawn...It was beautiful!”