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Cliff Garten Opens "Heart of Compassion" in Koreatown

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Los Angeles Opens Its Heart of Compassion, designed by Cliff Garten

Cliff Garten is a longtime public artist specializing, in recent years, in site-specific works that experiment with light.

His latest, [Los Angeles Opens Its Heart of Compassion](#), is suspended over the entrance to [The Vermont](#), two new luxury residential towers designed by the Jerde Partnership at the busy intersection of Vermont and Wilshire in Koreatown (across the street from a residential complex featuring a public artwork by April Greiman.)

The Lotus flower-inspired artwork consists of a 20-foot high, 3D sculpture attached to a 75' x 45' screen, all made of an open filigree of coiling, laser-cut aluminum strands, and lit from inside by intense LED light.

By day it is transparent, by night it's a galaxy of color. But the sinewy design extends into the staircase, raising questions about the relationship between public art and architecture and a system that has



Cliff Garten

Contributed By:



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tended to separate them.

DnA spoke to Cliff about “Heart of Compassion,” creating public art in a place where “the form of the city changes faster than the human heart,” and why he dreams of working at the scale of infrastructure.

You can tour the project and meet Cliff this Thursday night [at deLaB’s tour](#).



Kenneth Hahn Bridge, Baldwin Hills Gateway, by Cliff Garten

DnA: How did the “Heart of Compassion” project originate?

Cliff Garten: In the very entrance to the building floors 2-6 there was a parking structure that the Jerde Partnership had planned on covering with something; they didn’t know what. And that’s when I stepped in. So when I’m confronted with that kind of urban problem — and this was a problem of considerable scale — I’m really looking at the context of the site.

Koreatown is changing very rapidly and I think this development is the entrance of a lot of new people to Koreatown; a lot of the people who are renting the building are young, they’re students at U.S.C. etc. So it’s a whole different demographic coming in.

And that corner is a very busy corner in Los Angeles; there’s very busy bus transportation going on there, and you have the Purple Line across the street. So, with that kind of activity I felt that corner could hold something that was really bold — something like the scale of a sign in Times Square.



“Hearts of Compassion” is made of coils of 100 laser cut aluminum “petals;” photo by Caroline Chamberlain.

I generally start my projects with very broad research about the area, demographics, social history, ecology, and so we kind of focused on some of the motifs of Korean art, the lotus flower being one of them. So what I decided to do was to take that very traditional motif and then render it in these very modern and transparent materials.

This idea about transparency is a theme that’s running through all my work for the last six years and it’s gotten very involved with light, both daylight and colored light, with the increase in quality of LED light. So I wanted a kind of old meets new feeling.

But also one of the things that I feel about living in Los Angeles is its many, many places and cultures coming together; there is no one Los Angeles.

So it’s a very international and cosmopolitan place, and it’s also somewhat of a provisional city. I love this quote of Baudelaire — “the form of the city changes faster than the human heart” — and that’s the way I feel about Los Angeles. You know, every time you look someplace, it’s different.

There are areas like Koreatown that sustain themselves with a strong cultural identity but many of the signs in Koreatown are also in Spanish so you have that real mixing of people and cultures and so in some way I wanted the piece to be able to reflect that.

So the material transparency of the sculpture is really like a registration of these hundreds of colors a night through its services that in a way approximate that shifting demographic of Los Angeles where one place implodes on another in this kind of urban kaleidoscope.



The \$1.6 million “Heart of Compassion” is supported by a steel armature and backed by a 175 x 45 metallic screen. It is front, side, and backlit by multi-colored LED lights.

DnA: Now did you design the staircase as well?

CG: I didn’t design the staircase but they asked me to help out with it, so I designed glass panels to with the same kind of line work that we were working with on the screen.

DnA: The staircase really added to the strength of the project and made me think about the public art system in which art is applied to the architecture and doesn’t necessarily — it does sometimes — integrate with the architecture. But this has a kind of visual unity, and I wondered if there was ever any talk about the aesthetic of your piece filtering through the entire building in its totality so that art and architecture were truly integrated?

CG: This has been a topic of discussion in the world of public art since the 1980s — get the artist involved early. But the kind of comprehensive thing that you’re talking about, which I think was quite common in the nineteenth century, is generally not possible because the artist usually gets involved much later in the project. I came to this project when the building was entirely designed so it’s always as a matter of trying to fit your work into an existing context.

And you really want to be involved early in the game because I think art and sculpture in particular deals with things through materials and when you think through materials there are all kinds of different things that happen and having artists at the table early in that conversation can be very valuable. But then you are talking about the utilization of public money and construction it really becomes a cultural discussion and what our society willing to pay.



Rice Bowl, on the northeast corner of Vermont/Wilshire; image courtesy [April Greiman](#)

DnA: Now you have a fairly notable piece of public art opposite your building which is April Greiman's rice bowl. Did you in any way play off of that or have a dialogue with that piece?

CG: I didn't, I mean I think that the piece is large enough. Also, it's on the other side of the street and that's part of another architectural context.

DnA: It's interesting though that you and April, both of you coming in to Koreatown and both of you choosing to interpret Korean culture from your Western white person position — were you struck by the irony of that?

CG: That is ironic because I certainly could take criticism for that, but I think in the cultural soup that is Los Angeles it's totally appropriate.



Cliff Garten oversees installation of his Lotus-inspired art piece.

DnA: Did you talk at all with with members of the Korean community as you worked on the project about the receptivity to your interpretation of the Lotus?

CG: Well, the reception among people in Korea Town has been really good. They really like the piece.

And the thing is, I don't think unless we told you what it was that people recognize it as a Lotus which is the way a lot of my sculpture works. There is a subliminal messaging that comes in when the original research exposes some kind of fact or image and that image is what I work with to transform it into something that speaks to the past and the future, and I like to think that that's why the pieces fit in the context that they are in. Really, I've never had a piece vandalized ever, in public which I like to think is because they fit.



The design language of “Heart of Compassion” extends to the staircase of the building

DnA: It is, but interestingly architects are going into that realm as you know. They are doing more experimentation with skins.

CG: Absolutely, and the line between sculpture and architecture has been more and more blurred, since the 80s, I mean those lines have almost completely blurred.

The thing that’s happening to the field of public art — and you have to remember this is a field of endeavor, everyone wants to do it — is that young architects are really entering the public art field because it’s actually one of the only places they can get into and immediately build something that’s really interesting and be given control of the concept in a way they would never be given in architecture.

These roles are switching all the time and the skins are the best example.

DnA: Given the extent to which this artwork became a piece of architecture, would the next step or desire for you to be an architect or to design a building?

CG: No, that’s not where I’m going with the work. Collaborating with architects and being involved with their process is always a great thing but there is a difference. I’m not interested in my sculpture becoming architecture.

I think if I want to do that I would have become an architect because I had contemplated that when I was younger and I had actually been originally been accepted to an architecture school and decided to study ceramics instead, because architecture just seemed too technical.



“Bullet and Suspect,” an artwork for the Denver Crime Lab, designed by Cliff Garten

All images unless otherwise noted by [Jeremy Green Photography](#).

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.