



Architect's Newspaper, August 7, 2012 "Studio Visit: Cliff Garten," by Jack Skelley
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Cliff Garten

By JACK SKELLEY • August 7, 2012

News Studio Visit



Avenue of Light.

Cliff Garten

There are rare artists whose work crosses so many disciplines that categories fall short. And Cliff Garten's "civic sculptures" stretch into the worlds of architecture, landscape architecture, urban infrastructure, and masterplanning.

His jumbo-sized pieces consist of LED-illuminated sculptures, street furniture, landscapes, chandeliers, and even bridges that, while they visually dazzle, are also capable of transforming neighborhoods. They are most successful when Garten partners with enlightened civic engineers who know the value of rendering the public domain on a user-friendly, human scale. Pieces such as Sea Spires and Avenue of Light have even been economically uplifting, helping businesses flourish within an active pedestrian environment.



With a Master of Fine Arts in sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design and a Master of Landscape Architecture from Harvard Graduate School of Design, Garten moved to LA in 1999 and established a studio in Venice.

He recently made the news for his involvement with LA's new Expo light-rail line. His original scheme, highlighted by eye-catching canopies and developed with LA architecture firm ZGF and LA landscape firm Melendrez, was not realized as he envisioned. "The plan was lost at a point when political changes in the MTA caused a complete reorganization of the project," Garten said.

An advocate of civic collaboration, Garten is well aware of the challenges for an artist. "In the context of how American infrastructure projects are organized, art tends to become the window dressing of the project rather than an essential element of the infrastructure," he noted. "If we want infrastructure that we can take pride in owning and using, some of the fundamental aspects of how our culture regards our infrastructure and how the design professions in consort with government build our infrastructure will have to change," he said.



York Bridge

Redmond, Washington

The sinuous bridge supports cars and pedestrians on decks that curve over the river. Underneath are the Sammamish River and a bike trail. Garten collaborated with Entranco and AECOM engineers to represent "flow" both over and under the bridge, with braided aluminum panels, including railings. The result is elegantly lyrical in its appearance and comfortable in its human scale.



Sea Spires

Long Beach, California

Though not as towering as Garten's other light sculptures, the 16-foot, LED-illuminated, stainless-steel figures of Sea Spires are equally interactive. Standing sentry-like at a key pedestrian corner, they are curvaceous shapes evocative of underwater—or perhaps interplanetary—denizens transparently afloat. Though monumental, they resist the opacity and plopped-down appearance of much public art.



Avenue of Light



Fort Worth, Texas

The project consists of six stainless-steel sculptures that incorporate LED illumination and rise 36 feet along the median from Lamar Street to Main and Commerce streets. Each sculpture is composed of 100 stainless-steel plates, slightly turned from the preceding plate and welded together. The plates are designed to create a vanished edge depending on the angle at which they are viewed. Straight on, each sculpture appears translucent. Lights shoot up the center as well as the outside of each sculpture to reflect the edges of the metal.



Ribbons

San Francisco, California

A landscape architecture project in the courtyard of the historic Federal Building at 50 United Nations Plaza, Ribbons is created within an adaptive reuse project by HKS. Garten reframed the courtyard as a site-specific artwork, using recycled concrete and a permeable ground plane. The design transforms the classical symmetry of the original design by Arthur Brown, Jr., by retaining its axial connections, but inserting a sculptural matrix of paving, seating, fountains, and plantings. Serpentine elements seem to emerge and submerge across the open space.



Corridor of Light

Rosslyn, Virginia

These towering illuminated sculptures combine public art master planning with sustainability. The curved, stainless-steel sculptures—some pieces stretching 26 feet high and suggesting floating jellyfish or helixes—reflect LED lighting in changing patterns. They also knit together the North Lynn Street corridor by creating a sustained identity. Real estate values have increased accordingly. The project's funding was a partnership between the public works and public art departments, the Rosslyn business improvement district, and the Rosslyn Renaissance planning group.