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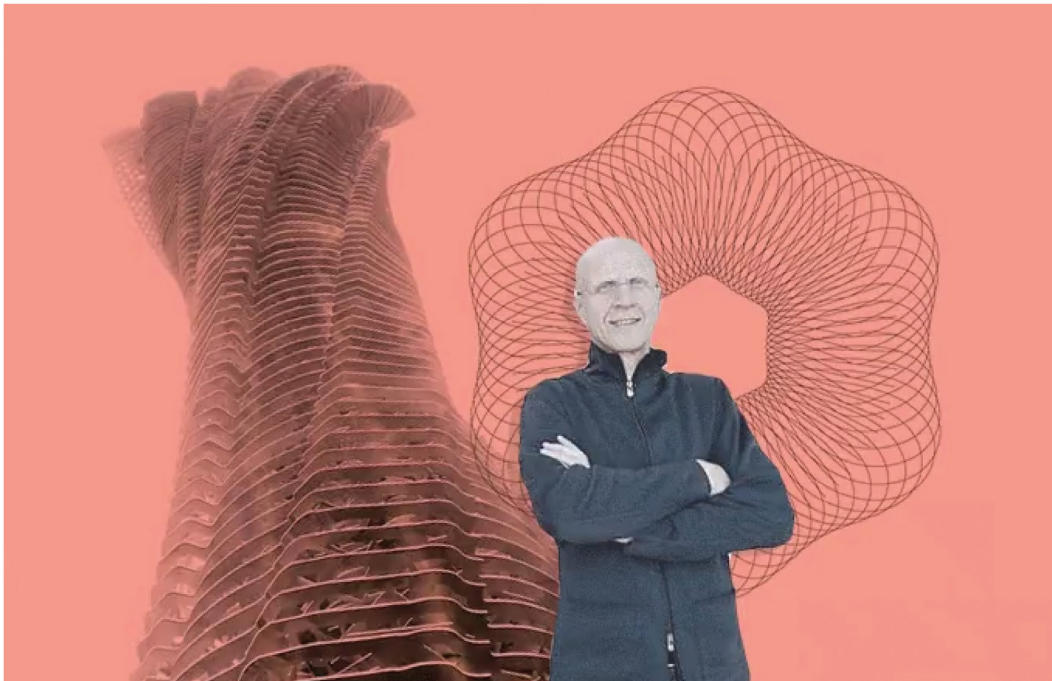
How Cliff Garten Is Blurring the Lines Between Design and Technology



BY TARA AQUINO

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Cliff Garten demands more from the future. Always on the move, the veteran sculptor, based in L.A. by way of New Jersey, has several projects currently in the works to not only stack his profile, but also progress the art world and technological innovation. Known for his LED-lit super sculptures and beautification of public spaces, Garten's forte is taking what's available to people in the present and making it better. He's a sculptor, sure, but at its core, isn't that the purpose of technology? Garten knows this.

On [his website](#), Cliff Garten states, "There is a latent potential in every public place and situation to become more than the specific functions it appears to perform." Speaking to the artist, it's clear that he lives and breathes by this mantra. The artist demands more of everything, and that includes technology, art, and even himself. He recently opened his latest LED installation, *Los Angeles Opens Its Heart of Compassion*; he's working on a new project in Philadelphia with Robert Stern Architects, where they're rejuvenating a whole street and a courtyard that's adjacent to a new luxury high-rise. And he's also traveling back and forth to Qatar, where he's working with the Qatari Public Works Authority on a new public space project. Here, we spoke to the artist to break down just how this innovative thinker is blurring the lines between design and technology.

Technology drives Garten's thinking about his work.



Image via Jeremy Green Photography/Cliff Garten Studio



Garten says: There's two ways to think about it: we can look at making stuff, because technology has a big influence on how we make stuff, why we make the stuff that we make, and why we're even able to do so. And then lighting is a separate area. When we were creating *Avenue of Light* in Fort Worth, Texas, which were these 40-foot towers that lined this new district of Fort Worth—the technology was just becoming available to light something of that scale. Every two or three years, the LED technology takes a big leap forward. What it allowed us to do was make the sculptures change color. They say the colors are infinite but they're not really infinite because there are more colors than the human eye can perceive. When you changed from, say, blue to green, you're actually seeing 30 colors or 40 colors. As the light fixtures got more powerful, they also got smaller. As they get smaller, we can do more magic because we could hide them inside pieces. That's very important [to my studio].

He has always been inspired by the potential for design in public places.



Image via Jeremy Green Photography/Cliff Garten Studio

Garten says: I've always been real sensitive to places. I remember the railroad station in Ridgewood, the town I grew up in, that was built in the turn of century. It was very different than anything else in town. The buildings around it were built during that period, too, and there was a care that was taken. I used to love to go there, not knowing what I was responding to, but I have a deeply felt sense of material.

People think that materials like wood or brick are dead, but they're really alive and resonate. If you see any of



my projects, and especially ones that are in open spaces, like *Ribbons* (which is in a courtyard in San Francisco), it's really about materials and how they lay down, turn over, and twist. Or, how they're in the level of the ground that you're walking on, or that you're sitting on a sculpture, or a bench that is a sculpture. The design is really about the physical body and the energy and the sensation in your body.

His designs evolve as technology does.



Image via Jeremy Green Photography/Cliff Garten Studio

Garten says: Sometimes, the technology that available now offers a solution that's like a better hammer. We did a sculpture for the new Zach Theater in Austin, Texas, which is this big bronze form called *Rhytons*. If you go around it, the motion sensor sets off a dialogue that plays from inside the sculpture that has people from the theater reciting Shakespeare. If someone has a better motion sensor, or something that's a light sensor, then we're going to be the first ones to buy that.

So let's talk about the other side of this, and that's in how we make stuff. I use to make designs with my hands first in the studio. In 2000, I started working intensively with computers, and the computer has only gotten better and better. I immediately started to draw things I couldn't draw by hand and that I could approximate the measurement of things that we're trying to fit the sculpture into. And we could look at the sculpture in 3D and turn it or model it. It allowed me to work in a way that I wouldn't have worked had I not had a computer.



At the same time, sculpting his work isn't limited to the using the technology available to him. He makes it a point to go back to basics when technology can only take his design so far.



Image via Jeremy Green Photography/Cliff Garten Studio

Garten says: A lot of people think that when we use technology to make something, it's kind of like you did it in a computer and then it's all done. The truth of the matter is that even though we could take the model of a bronze sculpture and we could study it and print it and mill the whole form out of foam, here's the problem: you want to make bronze and you've got a big piece of foam which you have to have to make the bronze mold, but when you make the mold, it's like going back to the Renaissance. You have to refer back to the old technologies to form this digital piece.

We either run by the technology, and oftentimes with lighting that's not within the budgetary reach, which isn't the case for this, or we modify the sculpture to accept whatever technology is available. It goes both ways.

When his work demands more of technology, he himself manipulates what is available, putting him one step ahead of the curve.



Image via Jeremy Green Photography/Cliff Garten Studio

Garten says: We're always pushing the people that make the LED lights [or the sensors] to make things they don't do yet. In many ways, the art pushes the technology because of what the art is asking you to see. I have a certain expectation for what people see and we ask the technology to respond. We're working on a project now in Arlington, Va., where we're hanging an array of lights over a plaza and we're actually fabricating the lights ourselves because there's no light in the market that does that.

We've pioneered a lot of ways of making forms—one of which is sectioning the forms. It would be like taking a big piece of bologna and cutting it into all these slices, and these slices become these laser-cut plates of metal, and they're either on a vertical shaft or structure, or we hang them from cables, which we've done for a lot of atrium pieces. As you stack the form with little spaces between them, the whole form of the sculpture emerges.

The other way is to take a single shape, and this would be for a symmetrical piece, and we would shape it in a very old piece of machinery like a press and we just take that shape and array it in a circle and that gives us the form. *Sentient Beings*, which is a sculpture in North Hollywood that we did years ago, was done that way. Very large sculptures for the light rail in Calgary, Alberta were done that way, [and it was called *Luminous Crossings*]. We're doing a new piece in Juno, Alaska like that, which is a series of 10 pieces that would redefine the waterfront. Making stuff is something that architecture pioneered and sculptors picked up on.

He's driven by reimagining common infrastructure and modifying basic engineering with art.

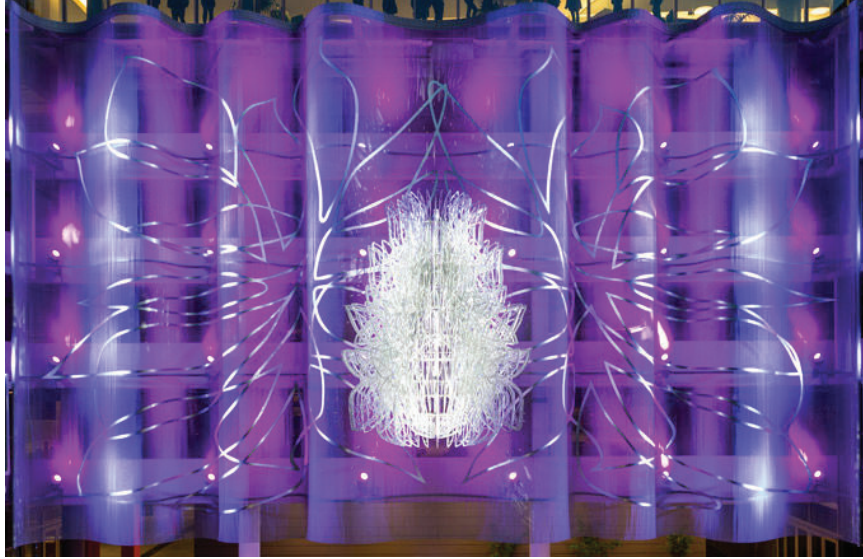


Image via Jeremy Green Photography/Cliff Garten Studio

Garten says: It's what I call 'the expressive potential of infrastructure.' In this country, we've been incredibly efficient about building infrastructure. It's what's made life in the western United States possible because of the great reservoirs and our water delivery systems. But we have not celebrated infrastructure. We've treated it almost like our dirty little secret. Those are the moments we could actually celebrate. In other words, as America has to rebuild its infrastructure of bridges, which are really deteriorating, we should also invest in making those things beautiful. For two to five percent more of the construction budget of something that might be there for a hundred years, isn't it worth it to put the time into it to express something about the place that it's in? Something that gives it a life beyond just its function.

Engineering has done an incredible job of satisfying our needs, but not our desires. Function is a double-edged sword: one side cuts to carry the cars across the bridge, the other side cuts to satisfy the people who ride across the bridge and look at it all the time. If public art is going to ever become more than just a little part of a project and approach the scale of an entire city, then it has to think through these infrastructure systems. But it costs a little more money. Ultimately, the question is, does our culture think that living with good-looking things that make the city work is worth that extra money? We know we can do this, but it does take the political will to fund it.

Garten's work looks ahead into the future, not just stylistically, but in driving the economy and benefitting cities.



Image via Cliff Garten Studio

Garten says: The thing that people miss when we build infrastructure is that there is a human scale to it, and that there can be these really intimate moments that can be nice. It doesn't have to be a circular, concrete sewer cover; we've done a lot of things with concrete that are amazing! Like I just designed a whole line of concrete site furniture and planters, and it's opened a whole new world to us. I'm dying to use it on a bridge or something. It costs more money, but in a large project, it's miniscule for the payback that the public gets.

I make the future. I have an axiom about public art, which I've been doing for 20 years now, and it's called the 'one-third rule of public art': three days to three weeks of inspiration, three years of pain and suffering (that's the getting-it-built stuff), and then three seconds of recognition. The inspiration is the best part because that's looking at something that's never been.

The project in Arlington was a typical public art project that was just going to be putting art on the sidewalk, but I said, 'Why don't we change the whole street? You have 30-story buildings going up on the street that's a new scale for the whole neighborhood, so why don't we build sculptures that are 30 feet tall? Why don't we illuminate them down the whole street and change the street lights, too?' Basically, create something that no one's ever seen that makes a space much more lively, engaging, and more economically viable, because everyone wants to live in a better-looking cities. Better-looking cities are better for business. It's just common sense.