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FOUND ENERGY

LOS ANGELES-BASED
CLIFF GARTEN
WORKS TO DESIGN
PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE
THAT DOUBLES AS ART.

BY LYDIA LEE

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CLIFF GARTEN STUDIO



On a chilly April morning in San Francisco, Cliff Garten, ASLA, is worrying about ferns. A massing of native deer ferns is among the plantings in the interior courtyard he designed for the General Services Administration building at 50 UN Plaza. He pokes a finger below the mulch. “I asked them to up the water, but I think they still need more,” he says. In sneakers, jeans, a yellow quilted down jacket, and a green fleece watch cap with blue dots, he is a tall, colorful figure against the white brick of the 1932 Beaux-Arts building that surrounds the serene 20,000-square-foot space.

It’s ironic that out of his 55 projects across the country, one of Garten’s most recognized works is also one of the least public (the courtyard is only accessible to GSA staff). But the Internet has dis-

covered *Ribbons*, and judging by how widespread the photos are, the mix of art and landscape has clearly struck a chord.

The courtyard has a neoclassical formality, with parterre-like pathways of concrete “ribbons” that lead to symmetrically placed twin fountains and straight rows of Himalayan birch trees. But the ribbons twist up from the ground plane to form casual benches, and the fountains are meditative cubes of granite with softly curving edges. “I wanted to counteract the hierarchical quality of the architecture and make it an inviting, usable space,” Garten says.

With a last name like his, he seemed destined to have become a landscape architect. But Garten comes from the showier world of public art. His recent work includes such diverse pieces as the

ABOVE
Ribbons is site-specific sculpture incorporated into the courtyard of the Federal Building in San Francisco.

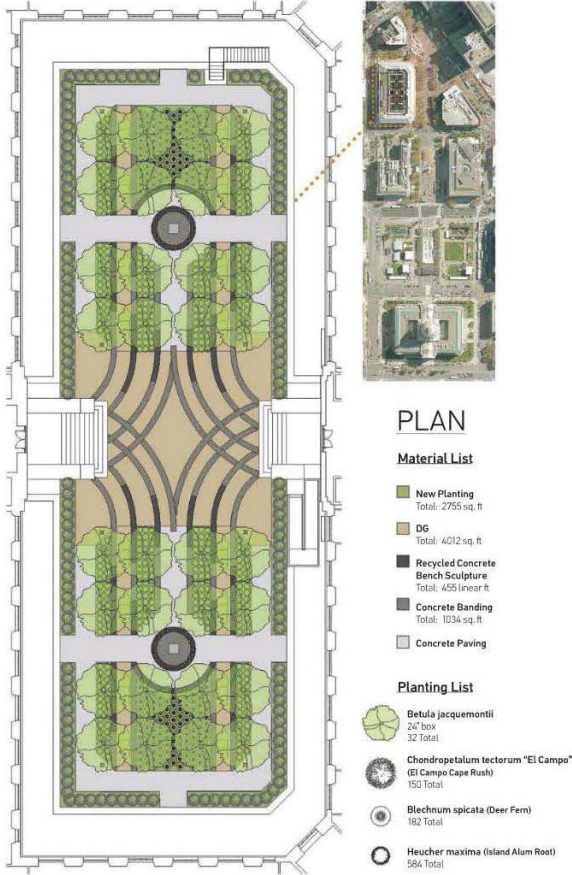


upcoming *Los Angeles Opens Its Heart of Compassion*, a 20-foot-tall lotus with aluminum petals lit by color-changing LEDs that's mounted to the side of a new building in downtown Los Angeles; and *Rhytons*, a 12-foot-long bronze sculpture of drinking horns in front of a theater in Austin, Texas, that's equipped with motion sensors so that it plays Shakespearean dialogue when approached by inquisitive viewers.

Public art has traditionally been about a piece of sculpture in a plaza, and many of Garten's projects fall into this category. But he's expanding his work to include civic infrastructure. If, on the spectrum of public art, Donald Judd's concrete cubes in the

fields of Marfa, Texas, are at one end and Santiago Calatrava's bridges are on the other, Garten's work is closer to Calatrava.

"Unlike many artists, Cliff addresses civic identity," says Angela Adams, the public art administrator for the county of Arlington, Virginia, who is working with Garten on a redevelopment project for the neighborhood of Rosslyn. "He created a stunning and distinctive vision for us. It's not so much about putting his art in public; it's about studying the problem and finding out how to solve it using art and design. He's easily in the top three in his field—there are so few people who think like he does."



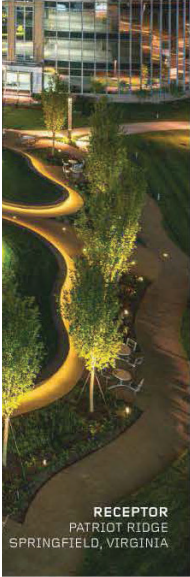
Garten's career exemplifies how many twists it can take to get to your final destination. He grew up on the East Coast and studied ceramics in school. After getting a master of fine arts in sculpture at Rhode Island School of Design in the late 1970s, he spent the next 15 years teaching art as a tenured professor at Hamline University in Minnesota and working in the studio. In the 1980s, there was a debate going on in the world of fine art about whether landscape architecture could even be considered art. But he found inspiration in the site-specific work of Robert Irwin, Richard Fleischner, and Siah Armajani, among others, and worked on his own ideas with the help of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 1992, he was asked to design a half-acre landscape, the Saint Paul Cultural Garden in Minnesota. Because he wanted to bring a diversity of voices into the design process, Garten asked six poets who represented different ethnicities in the area to write poems responding to the site. With text embedded into stone elements and railings overlooking the Mississippi, the landscape was intended to be a sobering reminder of racial and cultural tensions. The experience was transformative for Garten: "I couldn't just make an object anymore; I was too interested in the energy on the periphery," he says.

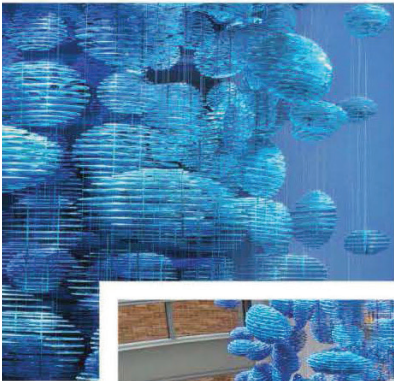
ABOVE
Ribbons gets its name from the twists of concrete that form low walls and benches.

OPPOSITE
Benches seem to rise up out of patterns on the courtyard floor.

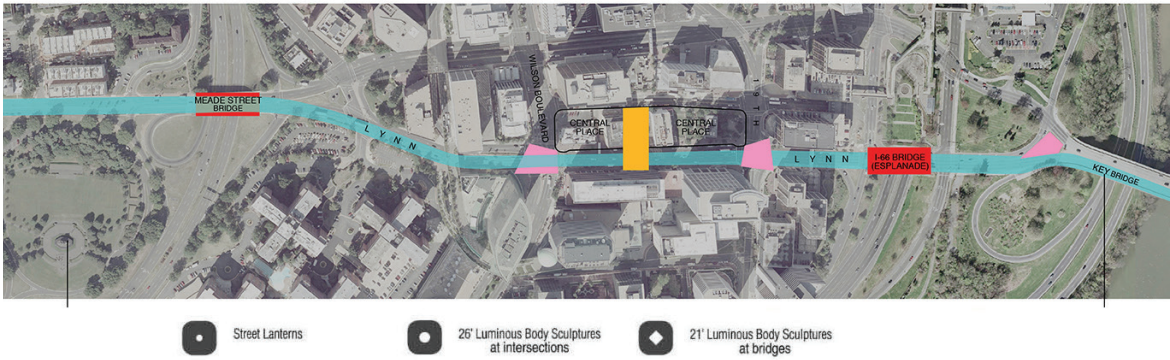
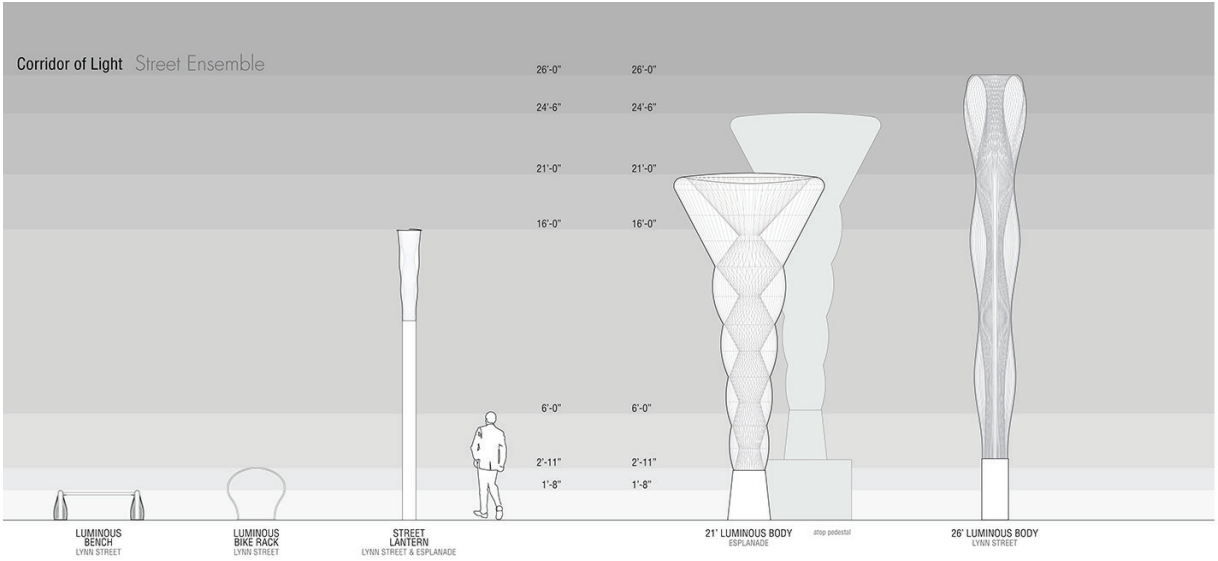




RECEPTOR
PATRIOT RIDGE
SPRINGFIELD, VIRGINIA



BLUE ECLIPSE
VETERANS ADMINISTRATION HOSPITAL
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA



At that point, in his late 30s, he decided to leave academia and got a fellowship to do a master's in landscape architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. "As difficult as it was to go back to being a student after being a professor, it was a very valuable experience," he says. "I took Carl Steinitz's legendary course on how to conceive of landscapes on a much larger scale. I don't work on that scale, but I keep the larger regional landscape in mind when I approach a design."

Drawn by the open horizons of California, he moved to Los Angeles in 1998. His first major commission, *California Song*, was a little park on the Capitol Mall in Sacramento. It included a fountain composed of a bronze bowl cantilevered off a granite boulder; the sculpture referenced the Sierra foothills and the history of native Californians, who would grind acorns on boulders and process the meal by putting it in a basket in a stream. "The subtext is there, but it's subtle," Garten says. "If the narrative is too strong, it doesn't feel right."



ABOVE
Corridor of Light
 is a blend of public
 sculpture and lighting
 planned for Arlington,
 Virginia.

LEFT
 LED lights play off
 stainless steel rods
 in the sculptures.

Locating his office in Venice, Garten made a fortuitous discovery: The local graduates from UCLA's school of architecture were extremely deft in digital modeling and fabrication. In his studio, he has a staff of two architects who help him execute designs. For instance, the lotus in *Los Angeles Opens Its Heart of Compassion* was designed using the software program Rhino, with more than 100 petals of differing shapes and sizes. Garten also relies on his early art-school training. "I think having a very deep understanding of materials has been very helpful for my work," he says. "Once you know one material really well, you can move easily to another, and get the maximum effect from that material within a certain budget."

"Cliff is really good at implementation," says Don Douglass, the regional coordinator of the GSA's art and architecture program, who worked with Garten on *Ribbons*. "All these major projects come to a point where value engineering comes into play," Douglass says. "He fought for his design when he needed to and was able to figure out practical solutions to problems without compromising on the design."

Having in-house expertise in architecture is also important to Garten's greater ambition, which is to transform mundane civic infrastructure—bridges, streetlights, wastewater treatment plants—into something more sublime.



His designs for the *Corridor of Light* in Arlington, Virginia, show how purely functional elements can be reconceived as art. To illuminate a major thoroughfare through town and improve the pedestrian experience, he designed glowing benches, bike racks, streetlights, light sculptures, and a new auto-and-pedestrian bridge. The project expands on an earlier work he did for Calgary, Canada; in *Luminous Crossings*, 30-foot-high lighted sculptures of stainless steel are arrayed next to a public transit station. They change color as the trains come and go so people can see what is going on at a distance.

When Garten is called upon to do a master plan for public art, it's another chance for him to widen the scope that is typically allotted to art. In 2007, the Calgary water utilities department tapped him to do a master plan; they initially just knew they wanted some sort of public art. Garten developed the concept of using the city's watershed as the organizing principle and picked several sites—including stormwater outfalls and a sewage treatment plant—along the Bow River, which flows through the center of Calgary, as candidates for artistic reinvention. “The idea was to rewrite stormwater engineering as a poetic narrative,” he says. “You can see the water coming out of the Rockies, and then it goes through this very

ABOVE
Workers at Moffett Towers in Sunnyvale, California, can take breaks on granite benches.

OPPOSITE
Garten designed two large earthworks to enclose a grassy ellipse.



carefully constructed system to reach you. So we identified sites along the river where you can have an awareness of the larger landscape through these very intimate connections with the water.”

These days, Garten’s favorite turn of phrase is “the expressive potential of infrastructure.” He says, “It can be a lens to focus our public awareness of who we are and how we use our resources. We can build a basic bridge with a chain-link fence, or we can choose to spend a little bit more and get something beautiful that we can look at for the next 50 years.” ●

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