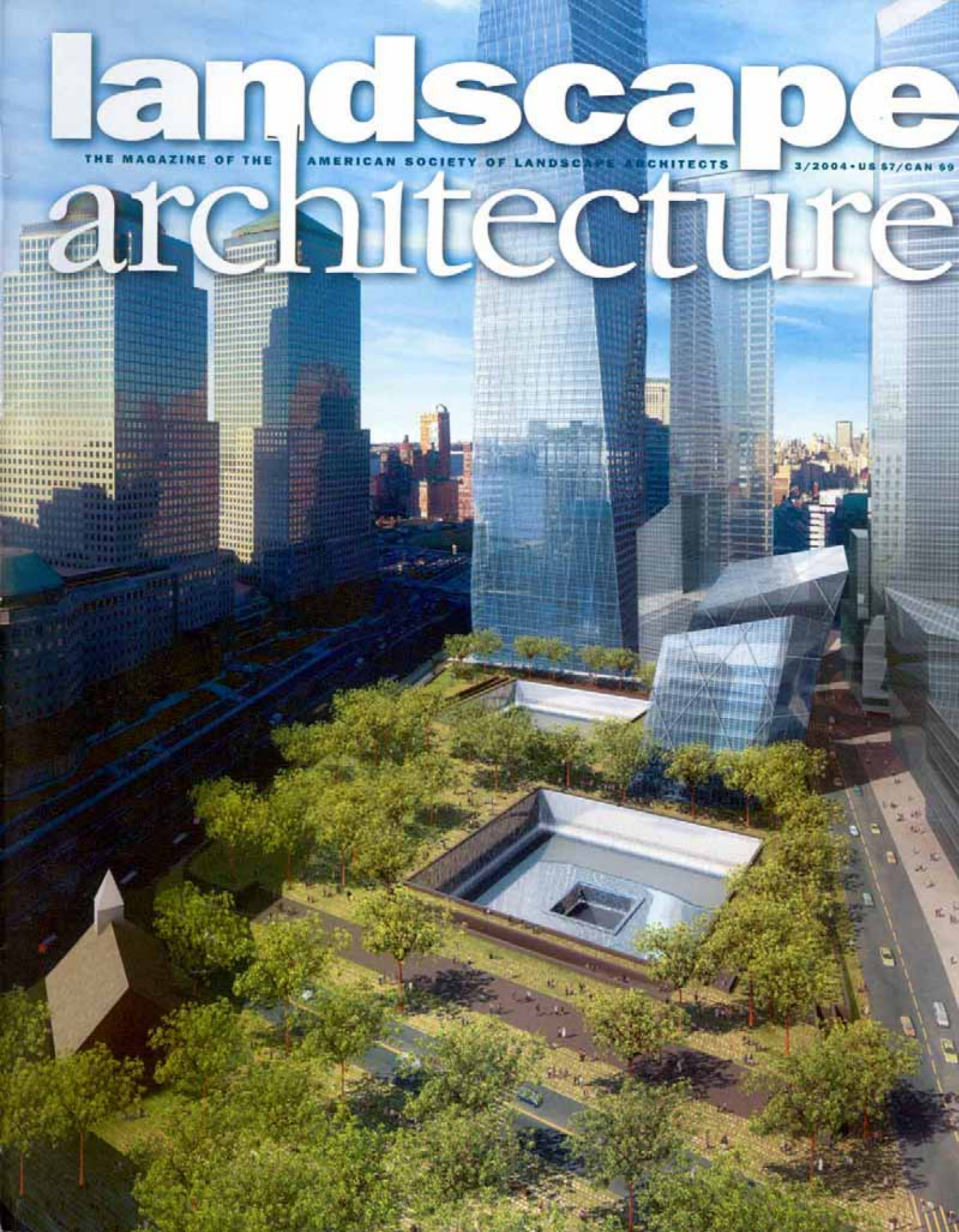


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SYDNEY BESTHOFF TELLS his story in a subdued version of his city's jambalaya idiom, the argot used by affluent New Orleans natives as they recount any event worth comment. Besthoff is the former K&B drugstore king, whose donation of more than 40 contemporary sculptures forms the core of the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden. The garden opened in City Park in November 2003; Sawyer/Berson Architecture and Landscape Architecture of New York City and Lee Ledbetter Architects of New Orleans collaborated on the six-year project for the New Orleans Museum of Art.

"I've told the story of how we got started collecting many times," Besthoff draws pleasantly. "In the early seventies, we had been looking a year for an office building for my company, and when this building came up for sale it was love at first sight." John Hancock Life Insurance owned the downtown structure, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) for John Hancock in the early 1960s. "I negotiated for it and made the arrangements, but nobody discussed the sculpture."

"The sculpture"—a tall, fluted, granite column topped by an abstracted crescent from which water flowed—was by Isamu Noguchi. SOM had commissioned it for the building's plaza, but by the time the building was to be sold, the plaza had settled unevenly, the sculpture was off-kilter, and the fountain wasn't working. During negotiations, Besthoff cast an appreciative eye on the Noguchi and said nothing about it.

"They had sent a young attorney from Boston to complete the paperwork," he continues. "And when it came time to sign on the dotted line and put up my money, I'm sitting

The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden opened in November 2003 with 50 works placed in nearly seven acres of New Orleans City Park. In bronze and stainless steel, *Figure 4*, right, by Arnaldo Pomodoro, is among more than 40 sculptures donated by the Besthoffs to the New Orleans Museum of Art.

DAVID SUTELMAN

For the sake of art, gracious spaces
under spreading oaks. BY ALLEN FREEMAN

EASY DOES IT IN NEW ORLEANS



there and thinking to myself, 'I know this sculpture is worth something.' I had heard of Noguchi and particularly liked this one. But nobody said a word about it, and of course it was part of the building, so they weren't going to remove it after the sale." As owner of the piece, Besthoff obtained the original shop drawings and had it restored.

Soon, with advice from John Bullard, the director of the New Orleans Museum of Art, Besthoff and his wife, Walda, started acquiring other contemporary pieces to keep the Noguchi company on the renamed K&B Plaza. They bought a few nonfigurative pieces, notably an airy stainless steel work by George Rieckey, a very tall stainless steel tower by Kenneth Snelson, and a work of segmented marble cubes by Minoru Niizuma. Most of their purchases, however, were figurative works, including a reclining *Mother and Child* by Henry Moore, a George Segal, and a bronze of four standing male figures by Elizabeth Frink. In an interview published in the New Orleans Museum of Art's quarterly, Walda Besthoff told



Architectural elements by Lee Ledbetter Architects of New Orleans include the pair of pavilions, above, flanking the sculpture garden's main entrance. The pavilions, which house rest rooms, a security office, and docent facilities, are conceived as lanterns, a motif Ledbetter derived from lights on a WPA-era bridge, center in photo below, and pursued throughout the garden.



William A. Fagaly, the museum's assistant director for art, that the collection "pretty much grew like Topsy." "With every good reason," she said, "when we first started collecting, we were not sure of ourselves, so we bought names. We bought things that we thought were fairly classic, and as time went on, we became more aware of who was producing what, and we let our own tastes govern what we were buying."

The idea for the sculpture garden grew out of a series of conversations between the Besthoffs and Bullard, who had long dreamed of adding a sculpture garden to the museum he has directed since 1973. The project started to become a reality when the Besthoffs agreed to donate works of art to the museum and the City Park board of commissioners approved a nearly seven-acre bite out of the park's 1,500 acres. It's an irregularly shaped parcel ideally situated between the museum and the New Orleans Botanical Garden. A leg of City Park's system of lagoons bisected the land—a plus—but, unfortunately, track for the park's miniature scenic train also ran through it. There was a stand of 200-year-old live oaks at one end and an unattended camellia garden under tall pines at the other.

Today, because the mature live oaks and pines were saved, it is hard to imagine the amount of work that went into the creation of the sculpture garden. For that, credit goes to the team headed by architect Lee Ledbetter and his collaborator, landscape architect Brian Sawyer. At the main entrance, rest rooms, a security office, and docent facilities are tucked into two matching pavilions (a gate will be installed between them). Ledbetter faced the pavilions in a limestone-finished cast stone matching that on the museum and shaped them cruciform in plan, which helps to minimize their bulk. Just inside the entrance, instead of the mature camellias—placed there decades ago by a group called the Men's Camellia Club—a lawn spreads under the towering pines. This forecourt leads into a romantic arrangement of paved paths curving around the lagoon and deeply shaded islands of green dominated by expansive live oaks draped in Spanish moss. As the sun shifts, garden rooms become illuminated and pull you from here to there.

As you wander through the Besthoff Sculpture Garden for the



City Park roadways define the garden site. In the plan above, the New Orleans Museum of Art is at lower right, near the entry plaza (1). From the pine grove (2), a visual axis extends across a pedestrian bridge (3) and over the lagoon to the oak grove (4). Other features include an exedra (5), an overlook terrace (6), a cascade pool (7), and a sculpture theater (8). City Park's miniature scenic trains skirt the garden near the museum.

first time, it's hard to envision its plan and nearly impossible to gauge its boundaries and extent. Instead, the landscape gradually unfolds before you, much like New Orleans itself, where you are pretty sure to lose any sense of the compass. The illusion that all this just naturally happened, that the landscape is unplanned, allows you to more easily immerse yourself in the art. It's a case



of nature protecting, even nurturing, whatever works of men and women happen to be placed here. This is a lovely place for looking at pieces of sculpture.

All the principals in the garden's creation—the Besthoffs, Bullard, Ledbetter, and Sawyer—describe the process as a sometimes difficult but ultimately satisfying labor of love. The museum selected architect Ledbetter first, and he in turn proposed a dozen landscape architects—both big name and not so famous—to work as his collaborator. The museum's sculpture garden committee settled on Sawyer, Bullard says, because of his experience as a staff member of the Central Park Conservancy, his work with Ledbetter when both were employed in the New York office of architect Robert A. M. Stern, and the appeal of employing a bright, young architect/landscape architect team—both Ledbetter and Sawyer were in their 30s when the project began. Ledbetter believes Sawyer's work on Central Park's bridges and on its mature plants helped his cause with the committee. But Ledbetter had a personal reason as well: "I knew Brian and I could disagree, and it wouldn't be the end of the world.

George Segal's *Three Figures and Four Benches* resides at the edge of the lagoon, above, and Kenneth Snelson's *Virlane Tower* rises from the water. Below, construction of footings in the lagoon for another sculpture.



That's important when you go into a project like this.

"As soon as I started walking the site with Brian," Ledbetter continues, "I began to look at it in a new way. He pointed out natural precincts suggested by the trees, places that later became even more defined as galleries. The precincts informed where the paths eventually would go and also placement of the ground cover and shrubs—the framing devices for the sculpture." City Park administrators quite willingly allowed the rerouting of the miniature scenic train around the garden, a move that really relieved

Riace Warriors, I, II, III, IV, by Elizabeth Frink is positioned in the oak grove, right; Monkeys is Rona Pondick's anatomical interpretation of the word "hybrid," below.



Ledbetter, who says that if the track had remained as it was, "the garden would be a totally different place today." Sawyer agrees.

"I always envisioned this as a late-nineteenth-century garden," Sawyer says about his approach to the garden's overall design. "To begin with, that's what City Park is, and to my mind it is the only style that this little bit of landscape lends itself to. We had a sort of dead topography where everything sloped one way or another, with no real rolling aspect to it. So we worked to get a more three-dimensional quality with some elevated areas while maintaining accessibility [for people with disabilities]. We were able to do that and still work with the existing elevation of the trees."

The lagoon, as the garden's baseline,





was recontoured and enlarged into two basins. The garden's three new pedestrian bridges had to be high enough to clear paddleboats, and the approach paths had to tie seamlessly to the bridges. From there, the land had to be made to flow naturally. The landscape design team achieved many of the grade increases with a lightweight structural soil composed of shale, which permitted up to three feet of surface elevation while allowing water and air to penetrate to established roots.

In addition, miles of drainage and irrigation pipe and electrical conduits, necessary to undergird the garden, form a substructure that had to be snaked through the site without severing tree roots. In places where workers could not bury new pipes and conduits under walkways, they temporarily washed away or blew away soil using a patented device called the Air-Spade, and they



then threaded lines through and under root systems. Most rainwater is diverted into the lagoon, but the designers also employed area drains and French drains—systems of below-grade gravel trenches and perforated pipes.

Piecing all this together was "a wonderful puzzle," Sawyer says. "Quite a headache, but in the end it proved fascinating." It all paid off for Sydney Besthoff, who says the garden's best feature is "the integration of the landscape and the old trees with the lagoon and the walks—the ambience achieved in the landscape."

Robert Graham's *Source Figure* towers over the cascade pool at the edge of the lagoon, top; Fernando Botero's *Mother and Child* suggests the pleasures of New Orleans cuisine, left; and another take on motherhood, Henry Moore's *Reclining Mother and Child*, presides at the entry plaza, opposite, under 100-year-old pines.

PIECING ALL THIS TOGETHER WAS “A WONDERFUL PUZZLE,” SAYS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT BRIAN SAWYER.

When visiting the garden just before it opened, I was delighted by the quality of Sawyer’s landscapes and the experience of walking through them and by the design and scale of Ledbetter’s bridges, pavilions, exedra, and fences. I found, however, that the color of the walkway pavers occasionally distracted my attention from the works of art. In a budget crunch, concrete sets, too light in hue, as it happens, were substituted for the originally specified granite sets, which would have been less conspicuous and would have also expressed a more appropriate permanence. Fortunately, thanks to New Orleans’s humid, warm climate, which quickly lays a patina on anything left out in the weather, the pavers will darken as they age.

Originally the designers were asked to create space for 45 sculptures, but the sculpture garden opened with 50 and does not seem crowded. Ledbetter and Sawyer indicated locations on the site plan without specifying which piece would go where and later worked with Bullard, Fagaly, and the Besthoffs—particularly Sydney, Ledbetter says—to place the pieces. Four works are especially at home: Kenneth Snelson’s 45-foot-high *Virlane Tower* seems content to reside on a pedestal in the lagoon; George Segal’s painted bronze, *Three People and Four Park Benches*, is just right for this park; and, every arachnophobe’s nightmare, the ten-and-a-half-foot-tall bronze *Spider*, by Louise Bourgeois, gives the impression of having dropped out of a spreading oak. The fourth, *Necklaces*, by Jean-Michel Othoniel, dangles from an oak like a string of Mardi Gras glass beads gone astray. These four, especially, animate their settings and engage one’s imagination.

“As in all collections, there are highs and some lows, and we will, over the years, we hope, weed out the lows and replace them with better pieces,” Sydney Besthoff says candidly about the sculptures he and Walda have collected. Some will argue that the *pièce de résistance* is the Noguchi that launched the collection nearly 30 years ago. When asked if the Noguchi might ever find its way from the K&B Plaza, where it still resides, to the sculpture garden, Besthoff replies thoughtfully, “I think it will, in due course.”

PROJECT CREDITS: **Landscape architect:** Sawyer/Berson Architecture and Landscape Architecture: J. Brian Sawyer, Tim Orlando, Justin Fulweiler, Tricia Alvez, Andrea Flamenco, Sarah Porter, Anthony Polito, Carmen Gonzales. **Architect:** Lee Ledbetter Architects: Lee H. Ledbetter, Richard G. Fullerton, Karri Maggio, Nichole Chauvin, Caroline Kwong. **Lighting designer:** Cline Bettridge Bernstein Lighting Design. **Civil S.M.E.P. engineers:** Burk-Kleinpeter and Huseman Wang Consulting Engineers. **Geotechnical engineer:** Gore Engineering. **Consulting arborist:** Bayou Tree Service. **Landscape contractor:** Oasis Horticultural Services. **Electrical contractor:** Frischhertz Electric.

