

Design for massive Jesus statue unveiled; gender, race blurred

By LESLIE SCANLON
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Construction will start next spring in southwestern Jefferson County on a 155-foot stainless-steel statue of Jesus Christ with no certain gender or race, which its designer said "represents inclusivity" and hope.

The designer, Ed Hamilton, yesterday unveiled a model of the statue that is proposed to rise above the site of the old Waverly Hills tuberculosis sanatorium, off Dixie Highway in Pleasure Ridge Park.

It would be part of a spiritual complex that Louisville businessman Bob Alberhasky — who was inspired by seeing the 120-foot-high Christ statue in Rio de Janeiro while on vacation years ago — hopes will draw millions of visitors from across the globe.

The architect for the project, Jasper Ward, said his responsibility is to get the statue "above the treetops" while disturbing the beauty of the surrounding forest as little as possible.

From the ground to the top, the structure will rise about 270 feet.

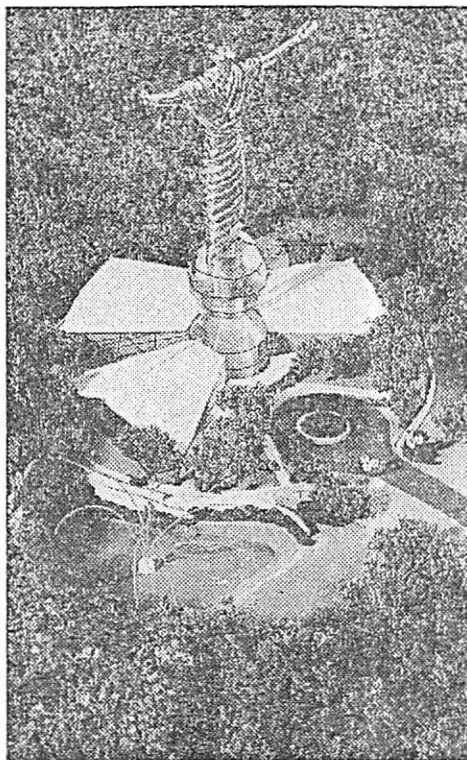
The statue itself will rise 155 feet from atop a globe 60 feet in diameter. The globe will have three observation levels — so visitors can "see the skyline of Louisville and, of course, people gambling in Indiana," Ward joked.

Beneath the globe will be a "life center" complex with a chapel, theater, gift shop and art gallery. Outside will be a two-acre lake with a fountain and a four-story "Stream of Life Waterfall."

As for the old sanatorium building, which Alberhasky described as an "overwhelming" 400,000 square feet, one possibility is condominiums. If that happens, Alberhasky hopes people would buy the condos "because of this," he said, pointing to the statue.

A model of the statue is on display at the Holiday Inn Southwest at Dixie Highway and Interstate 264.

Hamilton hopes the statue's stainless steel will have a feeling of lightness and will "be like a diamond out there in the atmosphere that would



A model of the 155-foot-tall Jesus statue, designed by Ed Hamilton.

never tarnish." To have a Christ figure sparkling with hope is particularly appropriate, he said, considering the sanatorium was a place of healing.

He designed a Christ with no clear gender and "no ethnicity," intending it as "a figure study that would represent a feeling of hope, a feeling of come-unto-me, a feeling of benevolence."

The statue will be built by Wehr Constructors Inc., which has worked on the Humana Building and other Louisville projects and which employs Alberhasky's brother-in-law, Jerry Bradley.

"It is a pleasure, it is a privilege to be a part of hope," said Skip Berry, speaking for the family-owned company. Clearly moved by emotion, Berry said he has one brother and a son who are ministers.

Erecting a massive statue atop a

building presents a "tremendous challenge" both spiritually and in engineering terms, said the project director, Alex Sud.

Bruce Bell, who is in charge of fund raising, said it will cost about \$3 million to build the statue and \$8 million to \$10 million for the life center.

He said he's working on a business plan that will include admission charges and ensure that the project will be self-sustaining once built. That plan will help determine the schedule for the project — spelling out whether the organizers will try to raise all the money at once, for example, or in phases. Bell said the organizers probably won't launch a public appeal for donations until roughly half of the project's cost has been raised.

Alberhasky, who runs a demolition and construction company, hopes the statue will bring 1 million visitors a year to Waverly Hills. Bell said 750,000 to 1 million people a year visit a 57-foot Jesus statue in Eureka Springs, Ark.

Bell acknowledged that not everyone has been "touched" by the project and that some "maybe even think it's ridiculous. But we're in the world, not of the world."

Several in the audience expressed support for the project but had questions as well.

The Rev. John Jones, pastor of Summit Heights United Methodist Church, referred to "the monumental scope of the vision and the resources required" and asked the organizers what they will do to resist the temptation "to put money first and not the Lord."

Bell responded that, if more money is raised from admission fees than is needed to pay expenses, some money — he estimated it could be as much as \$1 million a year — will be returned to the community through grants and contributions.

"I assure you that money is not the motive at all," Alberhasky said. "The motive is to set Christ in place while I have the life in me to ramrod the job done."