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and  
Sinners

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Ways  
to be  
Good

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TANGENT

Puerto Princesa  
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## The Art of Goodness: The Pacific Rim Parks and Artistic Vision of James T. Hubbell

Ariel Bleth

**I**N MY HOMETOWN OF SAN DIEGO, California, a mosaic-tiled pearl forms the center piece of the Pacific Rim Park on the shores of the bay. Entering the harbor and passing by the tip of the Shelter Island, boaters may spot the large concrete columns, shaped to resemble Chinese fans, which frame the symbolic gem sitting at the core of a large fountain. Only up close and nearly underfoot, however, do the images in the fountain's floor become visible. Made up of countless multi-colored tiles, a dragon, shore bird, tiger and serpent surface and surround the pearl. Ambassadors to this gateway park at the southern border of the United States, they emerge from the mythology of America, Russia, Mexico, and China.

The park, built in 1998, is the second of seven Pacific Rim Parks. On the edge of the ocean in Russia, China, Mexico, the Philippines, Korea, and Taiwan are public art spaces designed to facilitate cultural exchange and to honor their shared connection to the Pacific Ocean. In a collaborative effort between students from the East and the West, the act of creating these parks becomes an act of building relationships and finding common ground. Each park features a symbolic pearl and is part of a strand of parks that commemorate friendship and the choice to value culture and conservation over trade and economics. The guiding light and artistic director for this effort is the southern California-based artist and builder James T. Hubbell.

We live in a time of immense global change marked by a perhaps unparalleled imperative for universal transformation. There is a sense of urgency to find a road map that can help us navigate seemingly endless choice in a world often defined by divisions. Hubbell's artistic vision and the Pacific Rim Parks Project provide us with such a guide, an understanding of a dynamic aspect of goodness: the on-going choice to create and acknowledge, through beauty, our connections, our wholeness. "Art and beauty" Hubbell writes, "can bridge prejudice, build lasting friendships, change people's visions of how they are and what is possible in life; to, in fact, change our myths."<sup>1</sup>

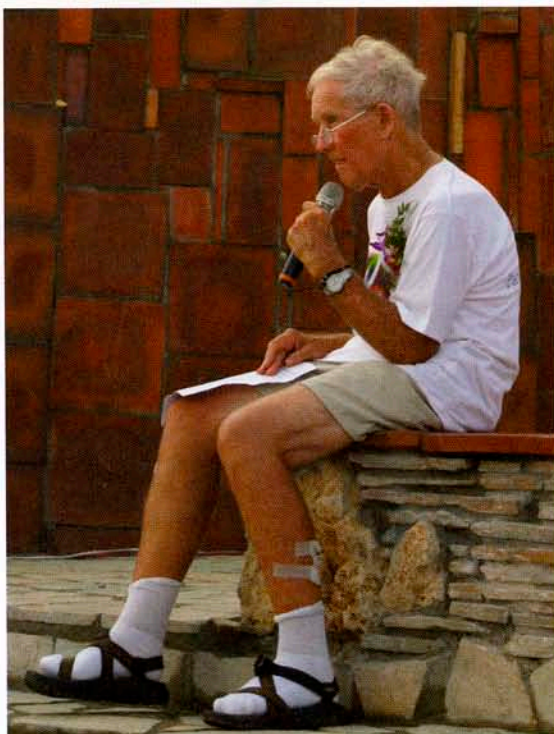
Hubbell's work can be found in all corners of the globe, whether as a park, building, stained glass window, sculpture, door, or painting. With the blending of color and form he seeks to create spaces and art that allow for connection to each other, nature, and to spirit. Even as a child he recognized a

societal propensity for separating the physical and the spiritual. "I think what we tend to do is divide things and understand them as separate from other things," he explains. "If you do a sculpture, people like to talk about the light. But you really don't have the light unless you have the shadow." His directive is this: follow beauty as it has the power, like love, to transform and unite the disparate elements in our lives.

**I** HAVE KNOWN JAMES most of my life, first and foremost as the father of my childhood playmates.

Recently, after I discovered my own latent interest in working with tile, I sat with James under an oak tree in southern California to ask his advice about substrates and adhesives. Only then did I learn about the parks project and begin to get an inkling of the immense vision that has informed the

James T. Hubbell







Tijuana, Mexico

and community-builder, Milenko Matanovic—came together in Vladivostok to build the first Pacific Rim Park.

Following a community-building model and design process called “Soil and Soul,” which Hubbell and Matanovic developed during an earlier collaborative project, students worked alongside skilled artisans and builders to create public art using local materials, culture, and symbols. They learned about the geology, plate tectonics, stone, and nature of the place. In the process, the students began to discover the stories of the region and to contemplate the question inherent in the park process: What does it mean to be a part of the Pacific now, in the past and in the future?

Kyle Bergman, architect and president of the Pacific Parks Project, has been involved since the beginning.

“We go to these parks without any design plan. We immerse ourselves in the land, culture, and society and begin a week-long design process.” This process starts with individual designs and drawings, which morph into larger group designs and eventually three-dimensional models. At the end of a very intense week of sharing designs and getting to know one another, students get a day off and generally head to the beach. The team leaders then synthesize the ideas into a single design that is manageable for the short remaining three-week timeframe and often limited access to materials. One of Hubbell’s gifts, according to Bergman, is his ability to hold a design vision without the ego of design. “He is very good at learning from and opening up to ideas from other people, especially the students involved.”

work of this unassuming, soft-spoken artist for more than 50 years; a vision of bridging differences through art and beauty.

In 1992, James traveled to Vladivostok, Russia, for an art exhibit. The concept of the parks was sparked during this visit by a conversation between James and Gennady Turmov, president of Vladivostok’s Far Eastern State Technical University. During that post-Reagan era of considerable tension between Russia and the U.S., Gennady and Hubbell played with the notion of utilizing a collaborative, physical process to engender cultural connection and peace. Two years later, seventeen architecture and design students from Russia, America and Mexico—under the guidance of Hubbell, as well as construction coordinator, Kyle Bergman



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Using the pearl, for example, is a concept that came from a Russian student during that first park project. Representing something that starts out as an irritant but turns into something beautiful, as well as a connection each host-country has to the ocean, the pearl remains the only design element repeatedly embedded in every park. For Hubbell, working with students is a process of teaching them to trust life. The students might be building a brick wall for the first time. They have to trust that they can put a brick in the right place, that the person next to them will do the same and that the final product will be OK. “In a sense, what we have to do is learn that life wants to work, that we don’t have to fight it,” Hubbell explains. For him, artistic and individual uniqueness is found in trust, action and honesty.

For both Bergman and Hubbell, architecture and storytelling are intimately connected. The choice of place and site, materials, scale, and proportion, all tell a tale. Building a park, therefore, is a collective process of creating a new myth. The Pacific Rim Park in Korea, for example, is on the volcanic island of Jeju, where powerful myths of wind, women, and stone have shaped the stories of this culture for centuries. Elements of these myths were incorporated into the park design and the iconic female sea divers, the Haenyo women, even assisted

in the building process. It is not uncommon for volunteer community members and organizations to get involved, many of whom come together collaboratively for the first time.

The unknown always is what story will be told. Each group of participants finds their own way of honoring their different histories and walking the fine line between highlighting similarities while encouraging their differences. While Bergman was in the Philippines building the park in Puerto Princesa, he learned of a local way of understanding the choice in perspective involved in this process. He shares that “in the Philippines there is a saying which refers to the ocean surrounding their seven-thousand-plus islands; how the water can be looked at as something which holds the country together or as something that separates all the islands.” For

Taiwan Park



*“Can we imagine a myth  
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Hubbell, the way we think of concepts such as beauty, balance, diversity, nature or truth determines how we treat the world and ourselves. “Can we imagine a myth,” he writes, “that gives the possibility of a world that is balanced, human, functional, and beautiful?”<sup>2</sup>

Students in a Pacific Rim Park project are encouraged to create myths from their own experiences, from what they are learning and what they are thinking, even through the writing of an opera. In 2013, the students building the park in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, performed such an opera during the park’s opening ceremony. Written as a group during their precious time off from the intense and often grueling building experience, they created an opera about an island ripped apart by a natural disaster of a grand scale and spread about all over the Pacific. None of the parts knew about the other or that they were once a united land mass until, many millennia later, another massive storm brings them all back together to create a whole island once again.

In Kaohsiung’s park there are two entry points leading to a narrower passage before opening up again to an ocean view—a conscious decision to acknowledge architecturally the importance of both expansive and funneling viewpoints. Architects are taught to pay attention to the edges of a building and how one thing transforms to another. So, too, does the creation of each Pacific Rim Park require a certain understanding of transition. “When I

talk about bridging differences,”

Hubbell clarifies, “it is really about not seeing things as separate. When I take materials that aren’t usually together, like shells and cement, it becomes easier to bring people together because I don’t see them as different or alien from one another.”

There has to be something to this. The building of the first Pacific Rim Park in Russia was meant to be a one-time-only deal. Three years later, however, the park in California was underway and twenty years later, seven parks dot the Pacific Rim. In fifty years? The Pacific Rim Park Project hopes to keep going until there is a park in every country that touches the Pacific Ocean—forty-one countries in all.

Bergman and Hubbell would likely both agree that this project has taken on a life of its own. It is about building relationships, after all, and a family of considerable size is emerging. Students from every country that has hosted a park project are invited to subsequent projects. During the last collaboration in Taiwan, for example, the community of Kaohsiung hosted people from Russia, China, Mexico, the Philippines, Korea, and America. The directions these relationships take reach out beyond the organization in many ways, including marriage, as is the case for two students who met during the building in Yantai, China. One was from Mexico, the other from Russia. They started dating, had a long-distance relationship, and eventually married and moved to the





States. They are still part of the Pacific Rim Park Project today.

One can't help but return to the notion of placing two or more foreign materials together to create a single piece of unified art; and to how this act somehow alters our understanding of ourselves and our relationship to everything else involved in the process. It is an act of re-imagining, of re-envisioning the world. You can see this in Hubbell's work, over and over again, as wood, metal, glass, clay, and stone are combined in boundless configurations of beauty. You can imagine it just hearing the name given to the park in Tijuana, Mexico—"Entre Corazon Y Mar," "Between the Heart and the Sea." You can sense it, the possibility it offers, in the marble carving of Yantai's phoenix bird as it holds the symbolic pearl and overlooks the ocean.

I am moved and inspired by the question Hubbell left his audience during a lecture he gave to a Friends of Jung Society gathering in 1993. Though these words were

offered more than twenty years ago, they still seem appropriate today, and the question he leaves us with perhaps even more relevant. "It is my hope that we are rediscovering Beauty. Not the 'pretty' of the nineteenth century or the ugliness of our century, but a robust kind of beauty that accepts the intertwining of chaos and order, and of darkness and light ... one that guides and transforms life because it sees life as a whole. Can we learn to put a sense of beauty to work for us?"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://jameshubbellart.com/>

<sup>2</sup> MYTHS ... THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES. Ilan-Lael Foundation Newsletter. Spring 2012.

<sup>3</sup> <http://jameshubbellart.com/blog/page/3/>



Puerto Princesa Park, Philippines