

## **If Fish Lived There**

### Bio-art helps restore the Mill Creek

Margo Pierce

Hands morph into fish in order to clean water: It sounds like Frank Esher and a tree-hugger ganging up on a sculptor to make her do the impossible.

Laughing Brook is an empty streambed in Salway Park near Spring Grove Cemetery, an engineered waterway with pieces of sculpture mixed in among boulders and small rocks, a concrete gully on its way to being a funky piece of public art – and more.

The Mill Creek Restoration Project ( [www.millcreekrestoration.org](http://www.millcreekrestoration.org) ) has teamed up with environmental artist Jackie Brookner, ArtWorks and a host of local businesses to create Laughing Brook, a greenway project with the lofty goal of cleaning stormwater runoff before it enters the Mill Creek.

The idea of a sculpture cleaning water might sound like a gimmick, but Robin Corathers, executive director for the Mill Creek Restoration Project, says the entire area around the manufactured stream, the new wetlands and the art will be as functional as they will be beautiful.

"An existing wetland is best," Corathers says "But a manufactured one is good, too. The mosses, ferns, lichen and other plants that we'll put in have an amazing ability to break down pollutants."

The pathways that weave in and around the plants and stream will also be functional, she says.

"If you use porous pavement ... the rainfall can get through the pavement into the soil and clean out pollutants," she says.

Far from trapping the pollutants in the soil and plants, this approach allows nature to do what it does best – thrive. As stormwater runs off the parking lot and adjacent ball fields, plants will use pollutants as food, essentially cleaning the junk out of the soil and restoring the water to a healthier condition before it's returned to the watershed.

### **You are what you drink**

The eye-catching part of Laughing Brook is the 100 bio-sculptures designed by Brookner and created in conjunction with local artists Gordon Strain, Tony Luensman and 12 ArtWorks ([www.artworkscincinnati.org](http://www.artworkscincinnati.org)) student apprentices. All are made of porous concrete and will serve as the foundation on which mosses will be placed. As the water passes over, around and through them, the sculptures will actually help clean the water.

At the beginning of the brook, the sculptures are in the shape of human hands. They begin to melt into indistinguishable blobs before evolving into fish that leap out to the water.

"I really strive for three different levels of functionality – the aesthetic level, a metaphoric level and the ecological level," Brookner says.

Reluctant to talk too much about the metaphor of her work – she prefers the viewer come to her own conclusions – Brookner acquiesces enough to offer one explanation.

"It's almost like a totem to have that kind of power to stimulate the human forces, the human will, to want to pay attention to our connection to water," she says. "The fact that we are water – we're 75 percent to 80 percent water, depending on how old you are – every living thing is water, so water is the thing that really links us all.

"We think of ourselves as being very separate, but in fact we can't breathe without the trees, we can't live without healthy water, we eat the fish – everything is an entire system. We've totally lost sight of that in the past couple of hundred years. If people are going to survive and evolve as a species, that's what we have to learn again – that we are only part, albeit an important part, but part of a much, much bigger interconnected system."

Pointing out that the six species of fish incorporated into the design are native species that would be in the Mill Creek if it were healthy enough to sustain life, Brookner says Laughing Brook and other efforts to clean water are critical.

"It's ultimately going to help the health of the river and bring attention to the huge problem that stormwater is the biggest water quality problem in the country, and most people are pretty ignorant about it," she says.

### **Imaginary boxes**

Coming up with creative and innovative ways to address the complexities of the Mill Creek is what the restoration project is all about (see "A Creek Runs Through It," issue of Dec. 20, 2006). In addition to an informational display made from about 4,000 recycled plastic milk jugs and supported by re-purposed telephone poles, reclaimed and recycled products will be used for benches, trash cans and other park elements, further educating visitors.

Located in the Mill Creek flood plain in an area with a lot of polluting industry, Laughing Brook focuses attention on another frequently ignored issue – environmental justice.

"The Mill Creek watershed is a very complicated watershed and issue politically, socially, economically and environmentally," Corathers says. "The health of the river is directly linked to the health and welfare of the neighborhoods and communities it flows through."

Those issues aren't going to be solved overnight or with a single project, she says. (See "Equal Environmental Rights," issue of April 18). That's why her organization is looking for innovative ways to take a "holistic approach" to all things related to the Mill Creek. In Brookner they've found a like-minded artist.

"I'm interested in breaking down boundaries," she says. "In the last couple of hundred years we've gotten very good at putting things in neat boxes, but the boxes are fictional; and the problems we've gotten ourselves into are so big that those boxes aren't really very functional anymore. We have to break down the edges."

To complete Phase 2 of Laughing Brook, the Mill Creek Restoration Project needs to raise another \$28,000 to purchase landscaping plants and materials.

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To contribute money or plants to Laughing Brook, call 513-731-8400 or write [robin@millcreekrestoration.org](mailto:robin@millcreekrestoration.org). ©

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