

The bloom is back at Domes



Michael Sears

The line stretched two blocks at the Mitchell Park Domes' November reopening. It was a return to the popularity that greeted the conservatory at its 1960s opening.

Light-fantastic renovation is the latest return to glory for a public space that's long entranced Milwaukeeans

By John Gurda

Posted: Jan. 3, 2009

It's always a pleasure to see an old friend come back from a difficult time. The old friend, in this case, is the Mitchell Park Domes.

Hailed as a world wonder when they were new, the Domes have suffered in recent years from a distinct lack of public investment that has led to a distinct lack of public interest. The complex may house one of the finest collections of plants in America, but people have been staying away in droves. The Domes are a place you visited with your parents when you were small or with your own children when they were small, but they have ceased to be a regular destination for most Milwaukeeans.

All that may be in the process of changing. The Domes reopened in November after a top-to-bottom renovation that breathed new life into this trio of aging beehives. The lobby was completely redone, hundreds of faulty glass panes were replaced and the bathrooms are essentially new. But the real novelty is the lights.

Each dome now sports its own halo of LEDs (light-emitting diodes), and the show dome has a complete latticework of the same devices. All of them twinkle, pulse, rotate, shimmer and flash in patterns it takes a while to track. When the sun goes down these days, the Domes are making a spectacle of themselves. To judge from attendance on a recent weekend evening, people are taking notice.

The new look is actually just the latest in a long series of incarnations on S. 27th St. Mitchell Park has been in the plant business for well over a century - long before the Domes were even a dream. The park itself was one of the first purchased by the city (not county) park commissioners in 1890. They bought it from Sen. John L. Mitchell, whose late father, Alexander, had been Milwaukee's leading businessman. When the senator donated five acres to go with the 25 he had sold, the city named the park in his family's honor.

Few Milwaukee neighborhoods were in such dire need of green space. The city's largest stockyard dominated the Menomonee Valley just north of the park, the Falk brewery lay just west, and the

massive International Harvester factory sprawled across the bluff a few blocks east. The area south of Mitchell Park was filling in with the homes of industrial workers.

Mitchell Park was conceived as a place of respite from the commotion (and the pollution) of the surrounding industrial landscape. Its first amenities included a spring-fed artificial lagoon, but a more imposing landmark was completed in 1898: a glass-paned horticultural conservatory in the best European tradition.

Milwaukee's crystal palace was designed by Henry Koch, a German-born architect whose other triumphs included City Hall and the Pfister Hotel. Its central hall featured "a representative collection (of plants) from every country known to commerce," wrote the Milwaukee Sentinel, including fig, banana and rubber trees, a variety of palms and 15 kinds of cactus. The barn-shaped side galleries, stretching the length of a football field, housed floral displays that changed each summer, fall and spring.

The Mitchell Park Conservatory was an instant hit. Milwaukeeans flocked to the free flower shows, and the steam-heated interior was a special attraction during the long winter months. "In its walls," declared the Sentinel, "perpetual summer will reign." The park commissioners characterized the building as "a beautiful winter garden" that would lure patrons "during the time that our rigid climate will forbid the visiting of our other parks."

From lilies in spring to mums every fall, the conservatory served Milwaukee admirably for generations, but years of hail, harsh winters and simple wear and tear finally took their toll. The crystal palace grew so decrepit that it was torn down in 1955. Nearby residents could hear the tinkle of shattering glass for days.

A replacement was soon in the works, and park officials were determined to make it an improvement on the original. They envisioned a facility with "separate climates" to showcase "a representative world-wide variety of plants" for citizens "who may never have the chance to travel." What they wanted was a zoo for plants much like the zoo for animals that was taking shape on the western city limits.

In 1958, park planners entrusted their vision to local architect Donald Grieb, who came up with an idea that had never been tried before: a cluster of four inverted bowls with skeletons of reinforced concrete and skins of glass and aluminum. Three would have their own climates - arid, tropical and temperate - and a fourth "show dome" would house changing exhibits. Such novel structures required special tools and special building techniques, but the construction crews were never stymied for long. Although the temperate dome never made it off the drawing board, the show dome opened in late 1964, the tropical dome in January 1966 and the arid dome in October 1967.

Like the Victorian palace that preceded them, the Mitchell Park Domes were an overnight sensation. Annual attendance quickly surged past the 600,000 mark, and the view of the Domes from the sunken garden to the south was one of the most photographed in Milwaukee. Although one reporter rather unkindly compared them to "a brassiere manufacturer's model," Milwaukeeans knew there was nothing quite like their Domes in all the world.

The conservatory never really went out of style. The floral displays were dependably first-rate, and the place was hard to resist in winter. In the bleak days of February and March, I always visited the tropical dome at least once just to bask in the presence of luxuriant palms, fragrant orchids and the year-round waterfall.

Although the Domes remained functional, the long-term trends were ominous. The sunken garden was replaced with grass in the 1980s, the deferred maintenance list grew longer and attendance dipped below the 200,000 mark. A sense of impending crisis led ultimately to the new look unveiled late last year.

The overall impact of that look has been, in a word, "energizing," according to Domes director Sandy Folaron. The LED displays, Folaron says, "attract people that normally drive by daily and never glance over." These are definitely not your grandmother's Domes in the hours after dark. The effect can be a little too kinetic - even frenetic - for my taste, but a welcome sense of vitality has returned to Mitchell Park.