



TAMPA, FLORIDA

# Kiley's Garden at NationsBank Plaza

## *An Irrational Fate*

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During the 1980s, architect Harry Wolf and landscape architect Dan Kiley transformed a riverside lot in downtown Tampa into a corporate headquarters. The façades of Wolf designed 's thirty-three-story tower and two six-story cubic bank pavilions and Kiley's four-acre garden were designed based upon the Fibonacci sequence: this mathematical synthesis of building and garden resulted in a powerful and cohesive design of historical significance. Dan Kiley is arguably the most important international landscape architect of the twentieth century, and the NationsBank Plaza Park is one of Kiley's finest works. Present threats to the property include redevelopment, loss of design elements, and deferred maintenance. However, there is significant national and community support for Kiley's work, and the press and the public should continue to pressure the City of Tampa to support the preservation of Kiley's NationsBank Plaza Park in its entirety.

### HISTORY

Dan Kiley (1912-2004) was arguably the most important landscape architect of the twentieth century. For over sixty years and in more than a thousand projects, he transformed the landscapes of private houses, public institutions, and vast urban spaces into magnificent places of natural beauty. Adhering rigorously to his lifelong tenet that the actions of humans are integral to the natural environment in which they live, he influenced generations of landscape architects and designers and



heightened the public's awareness and appreciation of our man-made surroundings. In September 1997, Kiley was awarded the National Medal of Arts, the highest honor that can be bestowed upon an artist in the United States, in recognition of his significant contributions to the design of major public spaces in this country.

In the 1980s, architect Harry Wolf designed a thirty-three-story tower and two six-story cubic bank pavilions for a Tampa corporate property. He invited Kiley to collaborate with him on a garden – NationsBank Plaza Park – that was based on the mathematical sequence that ordered the buildings' fenestrations, a series of numbers called the Fibonacci sequence that forms the basis for the "Golden Rectangle" and the "Golden Spiral." Just as this sequence had been used by Wolf to determine the tower radius, floor heights, dimension and the frequency of window openings, Kiley used the same proportions to determine the dimension and patterning of the walkways and grass panels that comprised the grid pattern of the plaza. This synthesis of building and garden – of translating a mathematical sequence into the rationale for the ordering of designed elements – created a powerful and cohesive design of historical significance.

The NationsBank Plaza site occupies a 4-1/2 acre wedge in downtown Tampa, Florida and is bounded by North Ashley Drive to the east, East Kennedy Boulevard to the south, the Hillsborough River to the west and the Tampa Art Museum to the north. It is eight feet above street level and is situated over a two-level parking garage. Kiley's NationsBank Plaza Park landscape is divided into parallel rectangular grass areas each 78 feet wide and varying in length, with 13-foot pathways between them. Pedestrians enter through a series of five palm allees. Sabal palmettos line the pathways, and six hundred Crape Myrtles are informally arranged within the area to contrast the site's geometry. The landscape still has high design integrity, but it is in fair-to-poor physical condition due to lack of maintenance and the removal of some historic elements.

The NationsBank Plaza Park (sometimes called "the Kiley Garden") is considered by many historians and landscape architects to be one of Kiley's finest works. Others outside the profession of landscape architecture have recognized the project's importance. In 1991, the NationsBank Plaza project was awarded the Florida Association of American Institute of Architects' First Honor Award. In 1993, it was awarded the National American Institute of Architects' Honor Award: Peter Walker, a juror and a noted landscape architect, commented that the project

...is the best project both architecturally and landscape architecturally I have seen in many years. The relationship of the entry plaza, the main banking room (fabulous) and the landscape spaces between the lower and the old museum are marvelous, seamless and truly beautiful....

In August 2005, a selection of projects from the more than one thousand projects that spanned the sixty years of work by Dan Kiley was exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago. The NationsBank Plaza Park was one of the key projects featured in this show.

## THE THREAT

The integrity of Kiley's NationsBank Plaza Park design already has been affected by the removal of key design elements, including the 400-foot glass-bottomed canal (the source for nine water runnels and pools throughout the garden) and three 78- by 39-foot reflecting pools along North Ashley Drive. In addition, the landscape currently faces multiple threats, including potential construction of:

- an Art Museum that would cover the eastern boundary of the site (including the former water features adjacent to Ashley Drive);
- a new park that would be adjacent to and impact the northern boundary of the project; and
- a Riverwalk that would impact the western boundary of the site.



Thus this landscape is in serious and eminent peril. However, the Museum of Art's site selection has been delayed and the plans for the park and the Riverwalk are still in the preliminary design phase.

The Florida Chapter of both the American Society of Landscape Architect's (FLASLA) and the Florida Chapter of the American Society of Architects (FLAIA) support the preservation of Kiley's NationsBank Plaza Park. Area design professionals have recently formed The Friends of Kiley's Garden, a non-profit organization whose purpose is to educate, preserve and rehabilitate this iconic landscape. A grassroots effort has been underway for the last year to procure letters of support from local and national design professionals who feel passionately about this landscape and its importance to the body of landscape architectural work. To date, letters from architects, landscape architects, educators and historians have been submitted in support of preserving this project.

## HOW TO HELP

There has been significant community support for the Gardens in the press. However, the public can:

- increase public visibility of this threatened site, and raise awareness of the current plans by the Friends of Kiley's Gardens to save the site. This would further the discussion about the fate of this garden in the context of Kiley's body of work and the significance of this public space to the City of Tampa.
- continue to pressure the Mayor to support the preservation of this Garden in its' entirety. The public could write the Mayor directly to express their concern of the loss of a unique, historic treasure of national significance for the City and the loss of another public space along the riverfront.
- request that the Mayor sign the preliminary application by the State of Florida for nomination of the site to the National Register, as well as sign the application for the local historic designation through the Tampa Historical Council to protect the Gardens. This would go far to ensure that Kiley's NationsBank Plaza Park would not be impacted by future development pressures.

The Mayor of the City of Tampa can be contacted c/o:

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For further information, please contact [info@kileygardens.org](mailto:info@kileygardens.org).

### Site Address

NationsBank Plaza Park ("Dan Kiley Garden")

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