



By Mark Sommer
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Buffalo's growing museum district: A cultural magnet

Changes along Elmwood Avenue expected to further Buffalo as a destination for art and culture

The outline of a dynamic museum district is taking shape, reaching from the twin towers of the Richardson- Olmsted Complex to the marble entrance of the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society.

The changes along the one-mile route, mostly straddling Elmwood Avenue, will further recast Buffalo as a destination site for art and culture. Other cities, including Cleveland, have benefited by establishing the same kind of vibrant museum district.

“It’s really starting to look and feel like a very important museum cultural district, which has the potential to attract a national community of visitors,” said Louis Grachos, Albright-Knox Art Gallery’s executive director. Here are some developments:

- Albright-Knox Art Gallery, one of the country’s finest museums for modern and contemporary art, is nearing a critical decision to expand. Adding a new building — and commissioning a world-class architect to design it — would further enhance the museum’s reputation while realizing a key goal of the 2001 strategic plan.
- Burchfield-Penney Art Center’s new \$33 million building is expected to open in the summer of 2008, doubling its current exhibition space in Buffalo State College’s Rockwell Hall. When completed, the exterior will boast a curved, 35-foot-tall zinccoated wall, limestone cylindrical form and block-shaped building adorned with limestone wainscoting.
- Transformative plans are under consideration for a restored Richardson- Olmsted Complex, and the state has put \$76.5 million behind the project. The plans include a combined architecture center — with temporary installations that celebrate Buffalo’s rich heritage — and visitors center located in the twin tower building.

While planning is in its infancy, the Urban Land Institute, a nationally renowned nonprofit organization, studied the Richardson site in May and suggested housing, retail and office space be located along the its northeast perimeter on Elmwood Avenue, with additional housing on Rees Street. It also proposed a hotel and conference center and restoration of the grounds. In addition, Buffalo State is expected to use the property for expansion.

While readapting the 400,000-square-foot Richardson- Olmsted Complex will take years, the institute recommended moving forward with some projects. The Richardson Center Corp. board, charged with deciding how to reuse the national historic landmark, has made the architecture and visitors center a priority.

Richard Geiger, president of the Buffalo Niagara Convention & Visitors Bureau, sees the architecture and visitors center as a central site to promote and coordinate cultural tourism throughout Western New York.

“That visitors center can be used to say, ‘Why don’t you look at [Erie Canal Harbor] or the [Roycroft Campus] in East Aurora. Here’s directions to Niagara Falls.’ It can be a full-service opportunity to keep the visitor in our region longer,” Geiger said.

He also sees it as a linchpin for the museum district.

“That’s when you’re talking about really starting a district and a reason for people to walk around. When that happens, you start to see real spending happening, and real economic development,” Geiger said.

A one-stop visitors center would be valuable to the museum district, said Cynthia Conides, acting executive director of the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society. “People who come to our facility often ask, ‘Is the Albright-Knox open today? Do you know if the Burchfield- Penney is open?’ They’re looking for a multitude of things to do,” Conides said.

Adding to the museum district’s aesthetic appeal are Delaware Park and Hoyt and Mirror lakes. They were among the factors in Elmwood Avenue recently being named one of the nation’s 10 most livable neighborhoods by the American Planning Association.

What’s occurring in the museum district has changed how the neighborhood organization Forever Elmwood Association markets itself, said Christine Pyne, president of the group.

“For a long time, the Elmwood Association considered itself stopping at Forest Avenue, but we feel that’s an antiquated view. The Richardson Complex has phenomenal potential, and our museums are fantastic,” Pyne said.

Ted Pietrzak, Burchfield- Penney’s director, said he would like to see an “Elmwood Museum District” — a term first used about 10 years ago, he said — officially designated to boost drawing power.

“What we need to do is go from lower-case ‘district’ to upper- case ‘district,’ ” he said.

New York City, Los Angeles and Cleveland are among large cities that have museum districts.

Cleveland’s district is known as University Circle. It lays claim to the Museum of Art, Museum of Natural History, Case Western Reserve Historical Society and the Botanical Gardens, plus other cultural institutions and tranquil Wade Park.

“Whenever you can send someone where they can take public transit, or park and stay for the day and do wonderful things that are all within walking distance, I think you have a winner there,” said Tammy Brown, vice president of marketing for Positively Cleveland, a tourism agency.

“When we’re promoting arts and culture in Cleveland, University Circle is the first thing we talk about.”

Pietrzak is encouraged by the growing recognition he’s seen of the importance of cultural tourism in Buffalo. He cited “success stories” such as the reconstructed Darwin Martin House and Babeville, formerly known as The Church, as well as the financial commitment to the Richardson-Olmsted Complex.

“I think there’s been a mindshift in understanding how important these assets are,” Pietrzak said.