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Martin House gets a pavilion

The restoration of Buffalo's Darwin Martin House has been, to quote Frank Lloyd Wright's own description of his masterwork, "well-nigh perfect."

From just about every standpoint, the Martin House Restoration Corp. board and staff has given the city back its second of three crown jewels of period architecture — following restoration of Louis Sullivan's Guaranty Building and anticipating the adaptive reuse now being planned for H.H. Richardson's Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane.

Buffalo's professional sports teams may rise and sink, but as Martin House visitor center designer Toshiko Mori has said, Buffalo has "a collection — quite a comprehensive collection — of architecture. For architectural aficionados, it's a very attractive place to come."

That architecture is a nationally-recognized winner and should highlight this city forever. That legacy now will be augmented, with the Martin House board's announcement of construction of Mori's beautifully designed Eleanor and Wilson Greatbatch Pavilion. This facility is critical to fostering repeat attendance because any visitors, having seen the house museum, may see no reason to come see it again. A first-rate visitor center with explanatory and changing exhibits gives reason to return.

The only place the board may have stumbled in this effort is on the size of the center. While the visual impact will remain unchanged, plans for underground "basement" exhibit space have been scaled back and the center has dwindled from 15,000 square feet to about 6,000 square feet.

That's unfortunate, because no museum complains of having too much space. Most are cramped, looking to expand. That kind of need, for example, drove the Mark Twain House in Hartford, Conn., to augment its 11,500-square-foot Victorian mansion with a \$16.5 million 33,000-square-foot visitor center.

The Martin House board is compensating for now by relocating some visitor center elements — including lecture space and a gift shop that will now move to space at the end of the house tour — to other parts of the complex. And there is some capacity for visitor center expansion, if needed.

The acclaimed design by an increasingly renowned architect, though, survives, with its subtly-inverted roof paying homage to, but not competing with, Wright's house. That roof, by the way, includes a drainage system for rains and snow, and load-bearing calculations were done by

engineers who worked on the Sears and Freedom Towers. As pavilion committee chairman Mark Mendell of Cannon Design noted, “the only thing we’re not interested in replicating is Wright’s reputation for leaky roofs.”

While almost all economic signs in Western New York indicate stagnation, decline or, at best, slow growth, this city’s huge representation of outstanding architecture will draw architectural tourists, who spend far more money than the average visitor. That’s a future worth expanding.

The next steps will be placement of an Architecture and Visitor Center in the towers of the landmark Richardson complex, and the enticement of thousands of Niagara Falls tourists to Buffalo with the aid of the proposed Niagara Experience Center as a regional tourism hub and efforts to arrange expanded local-visit advance packages with tour operators from Europe and Asia.

For a start on that process, Western New Yorkers owe gratitude to the leadership of the Martin House board and staff, to the Greatbatch family’s East Hill Foundation for donating half of the \$5 million pavilion cost, and to other public and private sector contributors. Unlike so many other Buffalo initiatives, this one led to an exciting project — and not just to bickering or studies gathering dust on a shelf.