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**FOCUS: MUSEUMS**

## Opening of Burchfield-Penney Art Center could signal boom in cultural tourism

*Ribbon-cutting to mark end of construction at art center scheduled to open Nov. 22*

**By Tom Buckham NEWS STAFF REPORTER**

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Bill Wippert/Buffalo-news  
Ted Pietrzak, the executive director, takes  
in the second-floor deck of the Burchfield-  
Penney Art Center.

The name alone, in mirror-finish block letters stretching across the curved Elmwood Avenue facade, is enough to slow traffic outside the new Burchfield- Penney Art Center.

With its breathtaking interior spaces, the futuristic two-level structure directly across Elmwood from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery is expected to make a splash that will ripple far beyond the Museum District, adding an impressive jewel to Buffalo's rich cultural landscape and giving tourists yet another reason to visit the city.

The \$30 million museum devoted to regional art, where a ribbon-cutting Friday will mark the end of construction, represents "a great addition to our inventory of arts and cultural attractions and museums," said Richard Geiger, president of the Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau.

With the Darwin Martin House in the late stages of a \$50 million restoration, the Buffalo Zoo at midpoint in its \$70 million reconstruction plan, the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy embarking on a \$450 million overhaul and serious discussions finally under way on preserving and reusing of the iconic H. H. Richardson complex, the stage is being set for a cultural tourism boom, Geiger and others believe.

He foresees a visitors center in the Richardson towers on Forest Avenue — on a restored Frederick Law Olmsted landscape just around the corner from the Burchfield-Penney, Albright-Knox and Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society — "as a starting point for people coming to town."

They would take in the Museum District; eat, drink and shop in Elmwood Village; and later that day, or the next day, move on to the Martin House, zoo, Buffalo Museum of Science and other cultural attractions.

"There are already a lot of reasons to be there," Robert G. Shibley, a University at Buffalo urban planner, said of the Museum District. "Now you've added another venue, and a pretty spectacular one at that."

In economic terms, the Burchfield and other cultural projects under way or planned "add value" to Western New York and its diverse tapestry of museums and performing and visual arts venues, said Celeste Lawson, executive director of the Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County.

The nonprofit arts and culture sector and its combined audience already generate \$155.29 million annually for the economies of Erie and Niagara counties, according to last year's study by Americans for the Arts, a national advocacy group.

That figure is bound to rise as such attractions as the Burchfield-Penney and Martin House generate more buzz beyond Buffalo and Western New York, she contends.

The burgeoning cultural scene even might entice more people to take up residence here, reversing or at least slowing the area's prolonged population decline, Lawson said.

The striking new neighbor on the block has not gone unnoticed at the Albright-Knox, one of the foremost museums of modern and contemporary art.

"We're really excited about what's happening there and how it's going to impact all of us," said Louis Grachos, the gallery's director.

From almost any standpoint, the new structure, designed by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects of New York City in collaboration with the Burchfield-Penney and Buffalo State College, offers much to admire.

When it opens to the public Nov. 22, one of the nation's premiere collections of regional art will finally have a place to call home.

Launched with a donation of drawings by the eminent American watercolorist Charles P. Burchfield in 1966, two months before he died, the museum bounced around the Buffalo State campus for two decades before returning to its original home in Rockwell Hall in the 1980s.

But the location in academic space on the second floor never suited the collection, which grew

exponentially with Charles Rand Penney's 1991 donation of the largest private collection of Burchfield works. The museum now has more than 670 Burchfields, among 7,500 paintings and thousands more drawings, sculptures and other objects made by Western New York artists.

The campaign to create an appropriate home for the museum started 10 years ago with a \$1 million gift from William J. Magavern II, a Buffalo lawyer and trustee of the Buffalo State College Foundation, and his wife, Louise, who has since died.

It moved forward in fits and starts, punctuated by the government funding paralysis after the 2001 terrorist attacks and by Erie County's 2005 fiscal crisis. But the money never quite stopped coming. As construction draws to a close, the museum has banked not only the \$30 million it cost to build the 84,000-square-foot structure but also another \$6 million in cash and pledges for its endowment.

"I had to be a cheerleader at times, but we kept each other going," said Ted Pietrzak, the museum's executive director. "We're like 'The Little Engine that Could' — a modest-sized organization that showed it can do extraordinary stuff."

He is ever eager to show off the result, starting with the two-story, 147-foot-long main gallery enclosed by the curved east wall. The concourse is impressive by any measure.

The ceiling towers over a maple floor, with full windows on the north and south admitting natural light.

Off the main gallery are a space for history-themed art and a contemporary gallery with a movable ceiling that can accommodate installation and projection art.

The first floor also includes a state-of-the-art auditorium with a stage and seating for 156.

Gallery space, including additional areas on both floors, will total 18,000 square feet — twice that in Rockwell Hall.

But the new Burchfield-Penney will be more than a museum. It will bustle with educational programs for art, art education and art conservation students from the Buffalo State campus across Rockwell Road, continuing and enhancing the long and mutually beneficial relationship between the institutions. The college underwrites about 40 percent of the museum budget.

"We're separate organizations, but we have a strategic partnership," Pietrzak said.

He is also proud to point out the structure's extensive use of "green" technology.

Art storage areas will have sensitive, climate-controlled equipment and gaseous, rather than water-based, fire-suppression systems.

A large percentage of the building itself was made with recyclable materials obtained within a 500-mile radius of Buffalo. It also incorporates waterless urinals, double-flush toilets and motion-sensing lights.

Pietrzak said he expects the museum operating budget to more than double, to \$3.5 million from \$1.2 million a year, and attendance to triple from 20,000 to 60,000.

The museum is expanding organizationally as well. David M. Tanner was recently hired as chief operating officer and Becky Powell as development director.

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