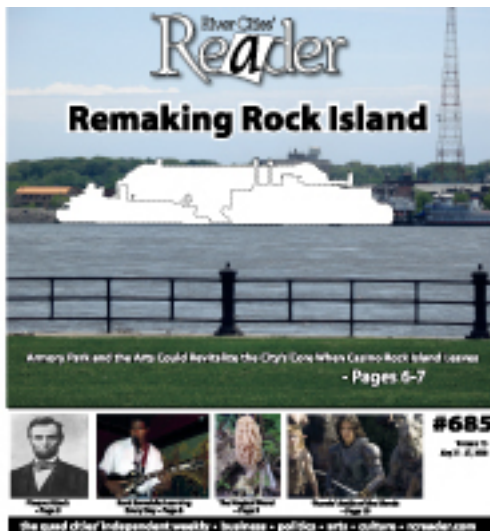


Remaking Rock Island: Armory Park and the Arts Could Revitalize the City's Core

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 21 May 2008 02:34

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As it moves toward the biggest reinvention of the city since the creation of The District in 1992, Rock Island is also working to make itself Artist Central in the Quad Cities.

The big ticket in Rock Island is the \$15-million Armory Park, which would reclaim the city's riverfront both from its current flood protection and Jumer's Casino Rock Island - which expects to vacate its current Mississippi River location by the end of the year for a complex off Interstate 280 in southwest Rock Island.

Meanwhile, three arts-related projects are now in various stages of development in Rock Island.

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- The Quad Cities Wood Turners and DeSoto Potters expect to move into a space on Third Avenue near 24th Street in the next few months.
- Developer Jeff Guthrie will soon begin construction on the DuMarché Market on Third - six live/work artist spaces available for purchase a few blocks to the west.
- And the Minneapolis-based not-for-profit developer Artspace is exploring using the abandoned Lincoln School on Seventh Avenue for between 25 and 30 live/work rental spaces for artists.



The first two are being supported financially by the City of Rock Island, and the third would almost certainly have some city funding attached if it comes to fruition. All three reflect the importance placed on the arts in downtown Rock Island's 2007-10 strategic plan, which lists as one of its nine objectives to "enhance the creation and performance of the arts for sale or public display in the downtown."

The District gave Rock Island's downtown a clear identity as the Quad Cities' destination for nightlife, and the city was among the first in the area to embrace downtown living as a key component to a vibrant central city. That philosophy continues with 21 residential units in the

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under-renovation McKesson building, eight of which have already been pre-sold. The Rock Island Economic Growth Corporation is leading the project, at 110 19th Street, and the City of Rock Island has invested \$1.1 million in the \$6.6-million project, according to Brian Hollenback, executive director of Renaissance Rock Island.

Armory Park and these arts-related developments represent the next evolution of Rock Island's downtown, and a recognition that the other Quad Cities have caught up to Rock Island in their redevelopment efforts.

The park could wrest from Davenport its largely unchallenged title as the Quad Cities' best riverfront, while the three incremental arts projects could help bridge the gap between The District and residential neighborhoods to the south.

"Downtown Rock Island wants to be a place where art is created," said Jennifer Fowler, community marketing director for Renaissance Rock Island. While the Figge Art Museum and the Bucktown Center for the Arts have established Davenport as a place to exhibit and see art, "we're a little more grassroots over here," she said.

Artspace - which gave a presentation at a study session of the Rock Island City Council on Monday - was invited to consider Rock Island by Fowler and Greg Champagne, the city's director of community and economic development.

Wendy Holmes, Artspace's vice president of consulting and resource development, said her organization is intrigued by how a live/work development for artists "seems to fit with what the city is doing."

Live, Work, Create

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The Quad Cities Wood Turners, who had outgrown their meeting space in the Union Arcade building in downtown Davenport, were attracted by "how deeply the Rock Island mayor and city council were interested in expanding the artistic community," said Jim Loula, the organization's president.

The 7,500-square-foot DeSoto Arts Building is located at 2324 Third Avenue and has been owned by the City of Rock Island since 2006. The Quad Cities Wood Turners and DeSoto Potters will each pay \$1 in rent a year for five years, with another five-year term available at a rent to be determined. The two arts organizations have agreed to pay the building's property taxes and utilities.

Most wood-turning organizations meet in basements and other borrowed spaces, Loula said, and the DeSoto Arts Building gives the Quad Cities Wood Turners meeting, display, and work space - with at least six lathes. "We're tickled," he said.

The city spent \$190,000 on fixing up the building, and Loula admitted that the space is inexpensive. But the wood turners - with roughly 75 members - have put more than \$100,000 in sweat equity in the building, he said. "We have a swarm of people who come down there," he added.

The DeSoto project expands Rock Island's arts corridor, and its proximity to the Mark Fowler's Liquid Fire studio (at First Avenue and 24th Street) could represent the beginnings of an arts-creation district.

Guthrie's project, four blocks west of DeSoto at 2010 Third Avenue, could build on that. The City of Rock Island demolished buildings on the property and sold it to Guthrie (who is both developer and contractor) for \$1, and it provided a \$150,000 grant to reduce the sale price of four units. Rock Island Economic Growth Corporation and U.S. Bank are also partners in the project.

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