

Embracing Diversity in the Visual Arts

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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The skeleton is now covered in glass that sometimes looks green and sometimes looks blue, depending on the light. That skin matches the accents on Davenport's new parking garages, and the building itself – while monumental – currently appears closer to that aesthetic than art – boxy and blank.

Yet a tour of the interior of the Figge Art Museum – slated to open in July 2005 – reveals that the space is far more interesting from the inside, with stunning north and south views and a floor plan and lighting system that allow for abundant natural light. That level of illumination will be a stark contrast to nearly all art museums, in which the sun joins high humidity as Masterpiece Enemy Number One.

The Figge Art Museum, combined with the River Music Experience, could make downtown Davenport the destination for cultural tourism in the Quad Cities. But a pair of other Davenport projects – the Community Art Resource Tank (CART) and MidCoast Fine Arts' Bucktown Center for the Arts – could take a major role in ensuring that the central city embraces diversity in the visual arts, not just masterworks but also emerging and professional artists and people who enjoy art-making as a hobby.

And although both CART and MidCoast have gotten started more slowly than their backers hoped and anticipated, they are showing significant progress.

Figge Art Museum

The “theme” of the Figge Art Museum's first year will be architecture, with the building itself as the centerpiece, said Davenport Museum of Art Executive Director Linda Downs.

In the building's current state, it's impossible to imagine just what the museum will look like with its finish and the artwork on the walls. What *is* clear is that the four floors have been designed with a great deal of thought to creating warm and inviting spaces, and that it will be a museum experience unlike anything most people have had.

Downs said the Figge space is “so much better” than she'd envisioned. “There's a rationality to it.”

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That might sound like faint praise, but Downs doesn't mean it that way. What might look arbitrary or merely functional on the floor plan becomes something greater when you walk through it; a visitor finally understands what architect David Chipperfield saw as he was creating the museum. "Every step [of construction] reveals more and more about the architect's vision," Downs said while giving the *River Cities' Reader* a tour of the building last week.

Downs nearly gushes when she talk about it. "It's really a fabulous design," Downs said. "It's beautiful and functional. ... Week by week, I'm more and more excited about it. ... It's a *great* building."

The technology to filter ultraviolet light will make the Figge Art Museum different than all but the newest museums. While most museums – even those built 15 years ago – forbid sunlight in order to protect their collections, the Figge will be filled with it. While UV-filtering glass lets the bright in, fluorescent lights in the skylight wells and computer-controlled shades will keep the light level in the museum nearly constant. "It's very nice to have daylight in an art museum," Downs said. "Normally, it's a big white box without any outside light."

Although construction is ongoing, the most surprising thing about the Figge is how bright it is inside. The design is open, and light comes into the building from both above and the sides. The lower floors feature "corridors of light" in which the floor plan allows visitors to see the entire length of the building, east to west.

And beyond art, the Figge Art Museum offers the unique open-to-the-public views of Mississippi landmarks such as the locks and dam and the Centennial Bridge. The height of the building gives stunning and fresh perspectives.

The third and fourth floors of the museum – the part that rises up from the wide base – will host temporary exhibits, while the first two floors will house roughly 250 works from the museum's permanent collection, including special galleries for the museum's Haitian, American, and Grant Wood works.

The opening temporary exhibit will be called *The Great American Thing: Modern Art & National Identity, 1915-1935*, and it is being organized by the Figge Art Museum and the Tacoma Art Museum. Last week, Downs said, the museums learned they'd been awarded \$300,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities for the exhibition, roughly a third of the budget.

The show, which will open at the Figge on September 17 next year and run through December, was inspired by the book of the same title by Wanda M. Corn, which exhibit co-curator Michelle Robinson said is an unusual process. Typically, a museum will have an idea for a show and then enlist a scholar to explore it. That was reversed in this case, which made it more challenging in terms of borrowing works. Corn's book includes images that are impossible to get, because they're already committed to other shows or because of museums' lending moratoria. "It's been hard to get the works we most wanted," Robinson said, such as Joseph Stella's *Brooklyn Bridge* series.

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Nevertheless, *The Great American Thing* will include roughly 130 works, Robinson said, and “we have over half of the works we need already.” The goal, she added, would be to have a mix of works familiar (such as those by Georgia O’Keeffe, Alfred Stieglitz, and Marcel Duchamp) and rarely seen. The gist of the show, she said, is that this early-20th Century period was a time when “Americans were figuring out who they were” and establishing styles and themes separate from their European forebears.

Also in the works is an exhibit organized by the Artists Advisory Council, a group formed by Downs to give local artists input on the new museum. The show, *41 Degrees North, 91 Degrees West*, is a “postmodern look at landscapes,” Robinson said. The exhibit’s title refers to the latitudinal-longitudinal location of the Figge, and the show will be on display next year from September 3 through December 11 in the museum’s print gallery.

The preparation of the Figge’s physical space and exhibits is just some of the work that’s happening organizationally.

One of the first actions of a new board – consolidating three different governing bodies – last September was changing the name of the new facility from Figge Arts Center to Figge Art Museum. “It’s something I felt strongly about,” Downs said. She said that the name change simply reflects that the organization has a permanent art collection; most “arts centers” don’t. She stressed that the facility will still focus on the community. “It’s going to be more of a community-oriented organization than it’s been in the past,” Downs said. “The name is more for our presence with our colleagues.”

More changes are coming. Staff members will no longer be city employees starting September 10 – one of the steps toward making the museum a private, not-for-profit facility – and the galleries at the Davenport Museum of Art on Museum Hill will be closing September 12 to prepare the collection for transfer. (Classes will continue at the site.)

The museum also faces some financial hurdles. The privatization of the facility means that the museum will eventually need to wean itself off the \$750,000 annual subsidy the city now gives the Davenport Museum of Art. Furthermore, the new building will have larger operating expenses: an estimated \$4 million a year compared to the current \$1.8 million. The museum is looking to sign up 1,000 charter members, double what the Davenport Museum of Art has now. And the attendance target is 80,000 people a year, and probably 100,000 the opening year.

The attendance will be a challenge, Downs said: “It’s going to be a big bite.”

In terms of square footage, staff, budget, and the size of its collection, the Figge Art Museum will be larger than 75 percent of art museums in the United States, Downs said – larger than the Des Moines Arts Center and comparable with the Columbus Museum of Art (in Ohio).

Can a metro area this size support such a large facility? “It is a concern,” Downs said.

Bucktown Center for the Arts

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While the Figge Art Museum will be housed in a glimmering glass building, MidCoast's Bucktown Center for the Arts will be in considerably more modest digs – a waterfront warehouse – down the street at 225 East Second Street. When the *Reader* talked with MidCoast about the project last year (See “Building the Arts Corridor,” Issue 451, November 12, 2003.), Executive Director Dean Schroeder estimated that construction would be done in spring 2004. That, obviously, didn't happen, but the project is picking up steam.

The mixed-use center in the former Petersen-Hagge furniture building will include retail space on the first floor, artist studios on the second floor, office space for cultural organizations on the third floor, and condos on the third and fourth floors. Bucktown got a major boost last month when the Davenport City Council voted to give MidCoast \$200,000 – a \$100,000 forgivable loan and a \$100,000 no-interest loan. The initiative has also received funding from the Riverboat Development Authority, the Scott County Regional Authority, the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, and DavenportOne.

The goal of the building is to provide affordable gallery and studio space to artists in the Quad Cities, and also to be self-sustaining. Rachael Mullins, a MidCoast volunteer who has worked on Bucktown, said another component of the project is highlighting the history of the neighborhood, which was notorious for its illegal Prohibition-era activities. (The Bucktown site, by the way, was a “dime-a-dance saloon,” Mullins said.) “We think the arts are a great tool to tell that story,” Mullins said, noting that the building will feature some signage, interpretive materials, and special events spotlighting the area's past.

And the big picture is to help revitalize the eastern corridor of downtown.

A measure of Bucktown's progress to-date is how much has been leased or sold. Schroeder said that he has purchase commitments on two of three residential condos, and one of five office condos, and that seven of eight studio spaces and four of six retail spaces are leased.

Schroeder said MidCoast is confirming construction bids and hopes to have the first floor open by the end of the year. Other spaces could be ready as soon as spring 2005.

MidCoast has already finished interior demolition of the former furniture store, and the next steps are a new roof and windows, and tuckpointing the structure. After that, MidCoast will install new electrical, plumbing, sprinkler, and heating-and-cooling systems.

Community Art Resource Tank

Both Bucktown and the Figge are buildings with a public face; they're designed for people to come in and take a look, and keep coming back.

CART is different; its goal is to cater to several different audiences: beginning and hobbyist artists who don't have a space in which to work, and social-service-agency clients who might not be able to afford art instruction, space, or materials.

The organization's plan is to provide open studio time to members, so that emerging artists

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have a place to create that fits in with their schedules.

“That’s what we are: an art workspace,” Executive Director Tracy Hayes said, “a cost-effective way for people to be exposed to art.”

Hayes said she hopes that many of CART’s customers will eventually outgrow the organization, and move on to class offerings and art opportunities given by groups such as the Figge, MidCoast, and Quad City Arts.

Like Bucktown, CART has taken a little longer than expected to get off the ground; the organization, housed in two floors of the Union Arcade building at 111 East Third Street, was originally supposed to open to the public in January.

But a full slate of more than a dozen classes starts on August 25, with a series of public lectures starting this fall, as well.

“Things are going really well now,” Hayes said.

Hayes said she now has between 35 and 40 artist instructors, and a second set of classes will begin October 20.

In addition, Hayes has organized several lectures and seminars with award-winning digital photographer Eddie Tapp. He will be leading a public roundtable discussion on digital photography at 3 p.m. on September 10 at CART, and will be following that with two workshops.

Once classes start, CART will be open from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays, and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays. Hayes said that CART’s hours will expand as the organization grows.

Behind the scenes, CART has already served roughly 300 different people, from age five up, through its ShareART program, Hayes said. That initiative started in October 2003.

The model is for individual memberships – which give purchasers access to CART space and discounts on classes – to support the social-service aspect of the organization.

“I’m definitely now seeing the results of the commitment,” Hayes said. “I do see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

For more information about the Figge Art Museum, visit (<http://www.art-dma.org>). To learn more about the Bucktown Center for the Arts, see (<http://www.midcoast.org>). And CART’s Web site is at (<http://www.thecart.org>).