

Transformative plans become well worth the wait

It is said that “Good things come to those who wait.”

For the Rochester Museum and Science Center, the wait was almost 30 years and the “good things” were indeed worth waiting for. In late January, after many attempts over the years, Rochester’s Preservation Board approved an architectural design connecting the Strasenburgh Planetarium to the RMSC. The result will change the museum in a fundamental and exhilarating way.

Ever since the planetarium opened in 1968, the relatively short distance between the buildings has become the source of increasing speculation and discussion. Constructed as separate structure on the institution’s campus, the planetarium had a compelling design and a singular purpose: to take visitors to the stars. While it was originally constructed with an underground connection to RMSC’s main building, this served only to allow staff to move back and forth between the buildings. As time went on the interest in interconnecting the two museum experiences increased.

One of the most difficult design challenges an architect can undertake is the connection of very dissimilar yet historically valuable structures. Yet this often brings about unique and exciting solutions. Recently, RMSC invited six architectural firms to submit concept designs responding to the challenge.

This “competition” attracted high quality design solutions that reflected the care for and understanding of RMSC’s mission. Of the six designs submitted, three were selected for further refinement. Eventually the design team at LaBella Associates, led by architects Bob Healy, Jeff Roloson and Dan Pieters, was retained to work with RMSC toward finalizing plans.

Through this process the museum leadership was able to take the design contributions of Rochester’s most talented firms and move their project forward with greater confidence.

“Connecting the two buildings was always a priority for me, but when I first arrived here our emphasis was on trans-

forming our existing program into a quality hands-on, minds-on interactive visitor experience,” says RMSC President Kate Bennett. “Having achieved this, our visitors are now overwhelmingly asking that we be able to flow back and forth between our two featured buildings.”

This connection is something that has been attempted many times over the years. Bennett’s predecessor, Dick Schultz, also campaigned to build one during his tenure from 1973 to 1996. In the early 1980s he retained architect Frank Grosso, designer of a major museum addition and new entry, to also work on a design for the connection.

One of Rochester’s most skilled architects at working sensitively with historic structures, Grosso proposed a sinuous and minimalist bridge connection. His proposal was taken before the Preservation Board. Primarily due to their respect for the Planetarium building’s unique form, the board insisted on a less visible, preferably underground, design approach. After much effort, the project was shelved.

Preservation processes are often protracted and frustrating to those wishing to reinvigorate historic properties. The challenge of building a new structure while respecting the qualities of those buildings it impacts is a daunting one. When the LaBella design team first presented the concept to the Preservation Board, the same concerns from 30 years ago surfaced. While RMSC clearly stated a need to establish a new and prominent gateway, the idea of “prominence” ran counter to preservation guidelines.

Roloson credits the board with having been thorough and thoughtful in carrying out its responsibilities. While the process seemed drawn out, in the end, he believes the design benefited.

“Through discussions with the board we were able to shift the design toward the south. We increased the transparency of the north (East Avenue facing) entry, allowing the curving form of the existing planetarium building’s exterior wall to be visible and continuous,” Roloson says. “No program area was lost and, while the East

Avenue facade is more understated, the main south entrance was allowed to become more prominent. This is where the majority of visitors will now enter the museum.”

Bennett describes a number of features that will fundamentally change the visitor experience.

“There will be a single point of entry where people can check in and choose to go to either the Strasenburgh Planetarium or the museum building,” she says. “They will have the option to easily experience each without having to go outside. Visitors can also access the new Science Store, which will be the only one of its kind in the area, offering families the opportunity to purchase cool, educational science toys and products.

“In addition, the newly reconfigured cafe will be part of free access so that visitors can eat at the cafe without paying admission.”

Another big shift for the museum will be the establishment of an outdoor science and education park.

“Wet Design is the company that created the outdoor water features, which will stimulate surprise and excitement,” Bennett says. “There is very cool science and technology behind how the fountains work and we know our visitors will want to know, ‘How did they do that?’”

Architect Pieters echoes Bennett’s enthusiasm for the new park.

“This will be an open, water-themed park on museum property,” he says. “It will connect directly to the successful ArtWalk project, greatly expanding the public space currently defined by the sculpture ‘Traveling through Stillness’ facing East Avenue.

“This will have striking similarities to how the Memorial Art Gallery has opened their grounds to the public with exciting mission-related art installations and art-themed public walkways.”

The new design opens the door to new experiences, Bennett notes.

“The existing adjacent buildings are being reoriented to work with the new Gateway building,” she says. “By utiliz-

ing space in new ways, there will be new experiences throughout. In particular, the Strasenburgh Planetarium will have more hands-on opportunities surrounding the upgraded experience under the dome.”

RMSC has always been one of our an-

choring cultural institutions. Now, having achieved this impressive milestone, the museum can finalize fundraising for this truly transformative project. Given the impact this is sure to have on our community, we should encourage its success.

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