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## Pierce-Arrow Museum to fuel tourism

*Owner sees new Frank Lloyd Wright-designed gas station attracting fans of architect, transportation and local history to Buffalo*

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James T. Sandoro, owner of the Pierce-Arrow/Buffalo Transportation Museum, stands in front of the addition that will house the gas station developed from 1926 drawings by Frank Lloyd Wright. It is expected to be completed in June.  
Sharon Cantillon / Buffalo News



The Lafayette Hotel and the lower floors of the Statler Tower are expected to be completed in 2012.

But the sleeper among downtown preservation projects may be the Pierce-Arrow/Buffalo Transportation Museum and a gas station developed from 1926 drawings by Frank Lloyd Wright.

With a 60-foot-high glass-and-steel atrium and giant wheel

displayed over the entryway, the museum's 45,000-square-foot addition is expected to be a cultural tourism attraction for fans of transportation, local history and America's greatest architect.

"People are going to say, 'Wow,' when they walk in the door. It's just going to be a fantastic surprise," said owner James T. Sandoro.

He expects the museum on the corner of Michigan Avenue and Seneca Street, which currently draws about 10,000 visitors a year with minimal advertising and infrequent hours, to quickly quadruple attendance.

But the addition is only part of a much grander vision Sandoro has for a campus with multiple buildings displaying more than a quarter-million artifacts obtained over a lifetime of collecting, including vintage Pierce-Arrow automobiles, carriages and bicycles.

Sandoro has bought 14 buildings within 1,000 feet of the museum to eventually show off his artifacts, including the former Upstate Farms Cooperative dairy plant at 194 Scott St.

He estimated the value of the properties, many of which include parking and all with new roofs and stable shells, at \$20 million. He said he hasn't tried to figure out the dollar value of his collection because, he insists, it won't be sold.

Sandoro, 67, who along with his wife and co-owner, Mary Ann Sandoro, a former curator of exhibits at the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society, has no children or heirs, said all of the artifacts and buildings will be willed to the state through the state-chartered Buffalo Transportation Museum.

"My wife and I have dedicated the rest of our lives to this. It will be a gift to Western New York and the people of the State of New York. We're happy to do that, and we want to leave the blueprint for them to follow in the future," Sandoro said.

The Sandoros live a short distance from the museum.

Jim Sandoro said he is only now talking about his long-range plans because the project is finally taking shape after years of delay. But while he thinks about how the museum's expansion could take shape in the future, he is most focused on the project at hand.

With a price tag of \$10 million to \$13 million, including \$6.3 million in state funds, the new addition of brick and precast concrete should be enclosed by November. Sandoro is hoping the gas station can be completed as soon as June.

"This will attract people from all over the world. This may be Frank Lloyd Wright's most unusual building ever designed; no one ever associated him with a filling station. And to have designed it for Buffalo, and to be on Michigan Avenue, on the same street we're on, will intrigue people everywhere," Sandoro said.

Ed Healey, spokesman for Visit Buffalo Niagara, said the museum should appeal to a wide range of visitors: "We think there will be interest from architecture, automotive and history audiences. We're very excited about it."

The first phase of the project brought a red brick facade in 2009 to the current 20,000-square-foot building.

Work on a 35,000-square-foot, three-story addition to the east of the new structure could start as early as next spring, if funding is in place. That space would display more of Sandoro's automobiles and automobile memorabilia, and would include a theater to show a film about Buffalo transportation.

The cornerstone of the new space is the full-size replica of the filling station drawn up by Wright but never built for the corner of Michigan and Cherry Street more than a mile to the north.

The station's features include a copper canopy; overhead gas storage tank with dangling red, white and blue hoses; a neon sign announcing Tydol, a popular gasoline brand; two fireplaces; and a private restroom and living room on the second floor enclosed by wraparound glass.

Copies of Wright's original drawings for the station also will be on view.

Sandoro said the mezzanine level, through artwork, lithographs and signs, will celebrate Buffalo's role early in the 20th century as "the greatest automotive center in the country at the time."

Project architect Patrick Mahoney, an associate with Lauer-Manguso & Associates, said the filling station will fit well inside a museum celebrating transportation.

"This is an exhibit designed to help one understand why and how the automobile was so much an important part of the evolution of American society," Mahoney said. "As a prop, it's an important way to show Wright's thoughts about the evolution of America."

Wright's design of gas stations remains a bit of a curiosity when looking at his body of work, he said.

Wright didn't have a lot of work in the 1920s, but he hit on the idea of transforming greasy gas stations into something clean and comfortable to appeal to women as car ownership became more common. His plan, which involved Buffalonian Darwin Martin, was to franchise them, but leading gas retailers weren't interested.

"The Depression was pretty much in its midst, and there weren't buyers," Mahoney said.

The only one he designed that was built opened in 1958 in Cloquet, Minn., a suburb of Duluth. It remains open as a working station.

The transportation museum will be the third local re-creation of Wright's work from blueprints left behind after his death in 1959. The two others are the Blue Sky Mausoleum in Forest Lawn, which opened in 2004, and the Fontana Boathouse on the Black Rock Channel, which opened in 2007.

The authenticity of such projects is debated in architectural circles. Some critics consider them dubious at best, since Wright's designs were site-specific and were often reworked on site.

"We love the controversy," Sandoro said. "I think it's a great discussion. A lot of the purists who were criticizing us and came in 2009 to the [Frank Lloyd] Wright Building Conservancy conference -- we actually hosted a meeting here -- turned it right around because we are putting it inside, and we're able to explore it as a model of exactly what he was going to build at Michigan and Cherry. We're never holding it out to anybody that he actually built it."

Wright scholar and author Jack Quinan said he has grown less critical of the filling station because it will be an exhibit inside a museum.

"It gives us a chance to experience what Wright was only able to put on paper, but which was an idea. It gives Buffalo a claim to importance. This was his idea for servicing the automobile, and it happened here, in a way," said Quinan, an art history professor at the University at Buffalo.

Still, Quinan said he remains uneasy about bringing Wright's unrealized projects to life.

"There is a danger it could cheapen the real stuff," he said.

Mahoney said he does not feel the station is being misrepresented.

"I think it's clear it was not there in 1927. A building like this can certainly be an interpretation of Wright's original design, but it is not that design," said Mahoney, a Wright enthusiast who is also board president of the Graycliff Conservancy, which is restoring the Wright-designed Graycliff Estate in Derby.

"If I were to present it, it would say, 'This is a Frank Lloyd Wright building based on a design for Michigan Avenue and Cherry Street in 1927.'"

As the museum moves closer to fruition, so, too, does Sandoro's dream of a transportation museum that began when he was a boy with a fascination for collecting Pierce-Arrow memorabilia.

"Probably by the time I was 8, I said I was going to have a museum someday to put my stuff in," he said.

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