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FOCUS: ARCHITECTURE

Buffalo on the Wright trail

Mausoleum, boathouse and gas station to join famed local structures

By TOM BUCKHAM
News Staff Reporter
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Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News
Gary Kwiatkowski, left, explains some of the architectural details of Frank Lloyd Wright's Darwin Martin House for a group of visitors.

On a sunlit hillside in Forest Lawn, work is under way on Blue Sky Mausoleum, the first of three unrealized Frank Lloyd Wright structures to be built in Buffalo.

Together with a filling station and boathouse that Wright designed in the 1920s - both headed for groundbreaking this year - the tiered concrete and granite tomb will be a way station on a Wright trail that should make the city a hot destination for architecture buffs.

The Wright legacy

These projects will add to Buffalo's rich collection of Frank Lloyd Wright architecture



Blue Sky Mausoleum
Status: \$500,000 construction under way. Completion September.



Boat house
Status: Raising \$5 million, with construction hopefully starting in a year. No target date for completion.



Filling station
Status: \$1 million construction starts this summer. Completion 2005.

The projects are on course to dovetail with completion of the Darwin Martin House restoration in 2006 and the Graycliff restoration, which is expected to be substantially finished by then.

"To have a cluster of significant, publicly

available Wright buildings in one city is pretty unusual," said Ron Scherubel, executive director of the Chicago-based Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy.

Interest will be further fueled by the mystique surrounding the legendary architect himself, predicted Patrick J. Mahoney, vice president of the Graycliff board and a Buffalo architect.

"Few people can focus attention like Frank Lloyd Wright, who was a master at manipulating publicity," Mahoney said.

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The Martin House complex, on Jewett Parkway near Delaware Park, will finally start to resemble its original 100-year-old self this summer. The long-missing pergola, conservatory and carriage house will be reconstructed, reclaiming its place as the jewel in Buffalo's architectural crown.

That will be followed by Graycliff, the Lake Erie shore summer cottage Wright designed for the Darwin Martin family two decades later.

The mausoleum, filling station and boathouse, rising from blueprints that gathered dust in the Wright archives for decades, will ice the cake.

Buffalo's richness

Few places outside Oak Park, the Chicago suburb that has dozens of Wright buildings, can boast a larger concentration of the architect's works, Scherubel pointed out. Fewer still have buildings of the same caliber as the Martin House, considered Wright's "prairie style" masterpiece.

"That's why what is happening in Buffalo is so significant," Scherubel said.

After years of talk about developing an architectural tourism trail here, the pieces are finally falling into place, said Margie Stehlik of the Darwin Martin House Restoration Corp.

A working group that includes officials associated with the Martin House, Graycliff and the other Wright projects has been meeting monthly. Under sponsorship of the Baird Foundation, it is planning for the day when all of them will be "visitor-friendly and ready" for the tourist onslaught, Stehlik said.

The group is working with the Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau to develop ticket, hotel, restaurant and entertainment packages.

"We'll try to link all the sites," Stehlik said. "With so much Wright inventory, we want to create a density of experience that will keep visitors in the area longer - staying overnight, spending more money. We're not there yet, but we're working on it."

Tourism specialists calculate that architecture buffs - older and more affluent than most tourists - spend about \$200 a day in the destination city.

If the Martin House entertains an expected 100,000 people a year once it becomes a state-operated museum, the local economy stands to reap at least \$20 million.

Add Graycliff and the other Wright sites, and the same tourists might linger - easily doubling the economic benefit.

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Also ripe is the single remaining pier of the Larkin Administration Building, where a commemorative marker will be placed in the next two weeks.

"When there are a number of Wright attractions, they are a significant draw," Scherubel said, adding that word has not yet gotten around about the new Buffalo projects featuring Wright commissions that were never built.

"We get calls all the time from people asking where to go to see Wright buildings. To know there are others in the making is enlightening and surprising," he said.

"Whether you keep them two or three days will be determined by how many of these projects we have are up and running," Mahoney said.

While Wright will be at the heart of any architectural tourism plan, there is, of course, much more to see - Louis Sullivan's Guaranty Building, H.H. Richardson's Buffalo Psychiatric Center towers, Eero Saarinen's Kleinhans Music Hall and the Roycroft campus in East Aurora, to name a few.



Forest Lawn management is dead certain that Wright devotees will visit in droves once Blue Sky Mausoleum is completed in September and that some will pay top dollar to return for eternity.

Twenty-four casket spaces will be available for purchase in the tiered granite structure, though sale prices have not been set, said

Derek Gee/Buffalo News
Workmen lay the foundation in Forest Lawn for the Blue Sky Mausoleum, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Darwin Martin family but never built.

Forest Lawn President Fred Whaley, who expects the finished product to attract wide interest.

"I'm not sure how much of it is going to be a Buffalo phenomenon and how much out-of-area," Whaley said. "There are Wright aficionados all over the world, so I expect the market will be greater than just our neighborhood."

The mausoleum was commissioned by Wright's loyal Buffalo patron, Darwin D. Martin, in 1928, a year after the Martin family spent its first summer at Graycliff, the eight-acre estate overlooking the lake in Derby. When the stock market crashed in 1929, a few weeks after the design was finished, Martin lost most of his money, and the only monument Wright ever designed went unbuilt. The \$500,000 structure, overlooking two ponds near the Delavan Avenue boundary of the landmark cemetery, is being erected by Louis P. Ciminelli Construction Co. from plans owned by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. The project is being directed by Anthony Puttnam, a onetime Wright apprentice, and Buffalo architect Robert Stievater.

Foundations contribute

Funding was provided by the Baird Foundation, the Seymour H. Knox Foundation, The Buffalo News, the Margaret R. Wendt Foundation and the John R. Oishei Foundation. Meanwhile, plans to erect a Wright filling station and boathouse are inching ahead.

It is targeted for the corner of Michigan Avenue and Carroll Street, next to the Buffalo Transportation/Pierce-Arrow Museum, and city planners have approved the station. "We just have to get a permit and get started," said museum President James T. Sandoro. "We'd like to start in the next four weeks in order to get it closed in before winter and hold the opening next year."

The \$1 million project recently received a \$125,000 county grant for architectural and planning work and will be included in a soon-to-be-launched museum capital campaign, Sandoro said. Wright designed the revolutionary gas station for a Buffalo oil company during the 1920s.

Land transfer agreements needed to build the boathouse on the Black Rock Channel near the West Side Rowing Club have been approved by the state and county, and public fund-raising for the nearly \$5 million project will begin soon, according to Theodore Marks, president of Frank Lloyd Wright's Rowing Boathouse Corp. The campaign's "quiet" phase has brought in about \$2.5 million, he said.

"We hope to get under construction as soon as we raise another \$1 million," he said.

Designed in classic Wright style for the University of Wisconsin, the 4,800-square-foot structure is among works the architect considered his most significant.

The gas station and boathouse projects also will be supervised by Puttnam, based in Wisconsin.

"Buffalo is in the right place at the right time, with the right product - significantly interesting in terms of the period they cover in Wright's career," Scherubel said. "You have a real treasure there."