

CINCINNATI MAGAZINE – AUGUST 2005

CREATIVE CLASS

ANOTHER EDEN?

The new Art Academy in Over-the-Rhine has the potential to transform the community inside and outside the school

By Kathleen Doane

The invasion of Over-the-Rhine is set to commence at 0800 hours on August 29. It will involve an army of 200-plus. But not to worry – no rock-hurling masses, mounted police, or dog-sniffing patrols will take part in this onslaught. We're talking a cultural revolution, launched by a brigade of young painters, sculptors, illustrators, printmakers, and other artists-in-training, who will gather at 12th and Jackson streets to attend their first classes in the new home of the 136-year-old Art Academy of Cincinnati.

Hopefully, the presence of the school also will inaugurate another kind of revolution, a substantiate transformation of OTR street life. Despite the developers and entrepreneurial pioneers who have been making significant economic and aesthetic inroads in the last five years – with projects like the Emery Center Apartments, the bar alchemize, numerous small business startups in the area surrounding Main Street, and upscale condos like the Gateway and American buildings-walking the streets of OTR can still be a risky business. Art Academy president Greg Smith is convinced that's about to change.

“The more we get good people coming and going from the neighborhood the more it will drive out the drug dealers and people who are prone to violence,” says Smith, shortly after meeting me on Jackson Street and handing me a hard hat. In front of us are two large brick buildings. One is a former Shillito's department store warehouse built in 1906, the other a 1925 building that once housed the Rosenthal Printing Co. and, more recently, the Barrelhouse Brewing Co. For the past 14 months, the Design Collective of Baltimore has functioned as both architect and interior designer in renovating and transforming both buildings into the new home of the Art Academy.

If Smith's statement about driving out the drug dealers sounds naively optimistic at first, he has hit upon the very thing that could make a difference: the sudden presence of lots of people (students, faculty, and staff) arriving and departing 24/7.

Smith, who's served as president of the Art Academy since 1994, ushers me through an opening that will be the school's main entrance just in time to miss a gritty cloud of construction dust enveloping the lobby. We step to the side when the dust cloud clears, I see we are standing at the center of a massive \$13.1 million project. At this point – I visited in late May – the project has entered the home stretch, though a mental tally of work still left to complete makes a move during the first week of July seem awfully optimistic. There are concrete steps to pour, walkway railings and grates to install, floors and walls to finish on several levels, plumbing and lighting fixtures to set on all six floors, and on and on, not to mention a cleanup of galactic proportions.





“We’re about two weeks behind schedule,” Smith says, “but that shouldn’t affect our move.”

Before we head up the steps to the student union space and public gallery on the north end of the first floor, Smith points out that the lobby is the foundation of a six-story atrium with bridges on each level to connect the two buildings. High over our heads a piece of plywood covers what will be its skylight crown.

The spaciousness of the atrium is indicative of the biggest difference between the old and new campuses: room and lots of it. The school has more than doubled in size, expanding from 54,000 square feet in its Mr. Adams and Eden Park facilities to 120,000 square feet in its new location. Administrative staff that shared cramped quarters will, for the most part, have individual offices of the second floor. Smith’s office on the southwest corner isn’t high enough for a killer view of the cityscape, but he’ll have a bird’s-eye view of street life.

Throughout the school there are more and bigger classrooms, galleries, meeting rooms, and offices, as well as amenities that students, staff, and faculty have never had before: a café that will serve breakfast and lunch; a loading dock on the northwest side of the building; a freight elevator; a library; central air-conditioning; several spaces that will be devoted to community-based services and programs; and four computer labs (three designated for classes and one open lab). Several of the specialty areas, such as the photography department, will also have small computer labs. “All of this replaces two spaces in the Eden Park building that weren’t even as big as one of these spaces,” Smith says, guiding me through the labyrinth that will soon house dozens of Macintosh G4s and G5s.

No feature, however, is more anticipated by juniors and seniors than the 100 studio spaces. A number of rooms located near the atrium on the fourth, fifth, and sixth floors will each be subdivided into four spaces. Each space will have a locker and a table or drawing board, depending on a student’s needs. Additional studios will be located in the basement. To dole out the spaces with as much equality as possible, Smith set up a lottery in which he drew names from a jar and students were able to then choose their space.

“Those around the atrium have great views,” he says, stepping into a fourth-floor room on the east side of the building. A wall of windows provides a panoramic view of OTR rooftops with the western edge of Mt. Adams visible in the distance. “We previously had studios for just 25 students; now, every junior and senior will have one,” Smith says, before pausing at the window to smile. “I think we’re going to see a lot more architectural painting, drawing, and photography.”

These views of Over-the-Rhine bring the conversation back to the school’s impact on the neighborhood, especially the economic implications for the restaurants, bars, clubs, and other businesses nearby. For some, heading home at the end of classes each day will be a two-block trip. Although there is no designated Art Academy housing, 25 freshmen will be living in the building on Main Street that formerly housed Kaldi’s coffeehouse. “We put the students together with Urban Sites Properties, which owns the building,” Smith says referring to the OTR

real estate development and management company founded 20 years ago by Bill Baum and Ed Hubert. “Eventually we’re hoping to acquire a lease or own a building that will actually function as an Art Academy dorm.”

Although the two buildings were gutted when construction began last year, Smith says there has been a commitment to preserving the structures’ past. He points to the marred and paint-splattered concrete floors that have simply been smoothed out and sealed, as well as the indentations of previous walls and beams in the ceiling. “It’s all a part of the history of these buildings,” he says.

Still, you can’t design a new art school without a little architectural edginess. Take the central staircase; some of the steps look like angular wedges. “We deliberately skewed (the steps) seven degrees off a 90-degree angle,” Smith says. “I asked one of the construction workers recently if he had gotten any ribbing for installing the stairs crooked, and he said, ‘Yeah, what’s up with that?’” The theoretical reason for this structural quirk is that it’s a representation of the seven degrees of difference that exists between magnetic north and map north, according to Smith. The less scientific explanation is that it was a fun way to tinker with the grid-based design; the same off-kilter feature can be seen on a few walls and soffits.

Before heading back down to the first floor, we walk out onto the roof of the north building, where Phase II of the Art Academy project is still a drawing-board dream. “We have several spaces planned for up here,” Smith says. “There would be a glassed-in winter garden where students could hang out, and a terrace that could be used for multiple functions, like donor and alumni events.”

Phase II also would include improvements to the streetscape surrounding the school. “The sidewalk is in such bad shape – sunken in places where water pools and freezes into sheets of ice during the winter,” Smith notes. “It needs to be redone; it’s all a matter of money.” Fundraising has gone well, he says, but it’s still \$1.9 million shy of the \$13.1 million cost.

When we return to ground level and step out onto 12th Street, the conversation turns again to the neighborhood and the students’ safety. Smith acknowledges that a building packed with electronic equipment, not to mention lots of young people with cars and computers, is going to be a big target, so a number of measures have been taken to protect the students. Outside, cameras will monitor activity around the building and every student, staff member, and faculty member will carry an electronic ID card that will be their key. Everyone entering the building, which will be open at all times, will check in with a receptionist and security guards at the front desk; and two security guards will be on duty at night, allowing one to remain at the front desk if the other has to respond to a problem.

“We began working last year with a couple of District 1 cops who began educating the kids and faculty about Over-the-Rhine,” Smith says. “We’re also making provisions to walk students back to their cars if they need assistance.”

Just before we head to our cars, Smith grabs a large paint bucket and begins collecting scrap metal. “Pieces for an art project I’m conspiring to do,” he tells me, “I can’t say more.”

A few days after my tour of the new Academy, I connect with a group of students who are helping with the move. They’re packing at the Mt. Adams campus, where many of the Academy’s printmaking classes were held, and can’t wait to stake a claim on those new studios. The general feeling is that the open layout of the new studios – none of which have doors – will foster a renewed sense of community among students, staff, and faculty.

“I’ve seen so little of other students’ artwork outside of a critique of classroom,” says Ruth Wartman, a junior specializing in painting. “Now we’ll be able to see what people are working on, and learn from each other in a way we’ve never been able to do.”

Senior Rob Mohan, an illustration major, says 24-hour access to the building will be another big plus. “We were always jealous of the DAAP people, who could get into the school whenever they wanted,” he says, referring to students in the University of Cincinnati’s school of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning. “We were always asking, ‘Why can’t we have that?’”

“I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve been kicked out of the building because I was there finishing a project that was due in the morning,” Wartman says.

Still, Mohan, Wartman, and the others admit it’s hard to leave Eden Park. “I’m going to miss going outside to eat my lunch under a tree,” Wartman says. Even Smith acknowledges he’s heard a bit of grumbling from faculty and staff.

“Some people are resistant to change,” he says. “I understand that.” The he quotes a 90-year-old alumnus, who recently told him, “I’m really not happy about leaving the old homestead in Eden Park. But when I see the plans for the new school, I’d really like to be a student again.” And who knows – this year’s students may someday be able to claim that they were among the Art Academy pioneers whose presence helped change the streets of Over-the-Rhine.