



Downtown Tampa Enjoys Cultural Rebirth

By GARY SHEPHERD

The year 2010 will be remarkable for downtown Tampa's cultural scene. A multifaceted culmination of arts planning, fundraising, and construction will profoundly impact life downtown and in nearby neighborhoods.

Tampa's arts lineup includes myriad buildings, institutions, and events that are brand new or soon to open. Others are being relocated, reprogrammed, or rebranded. And despite the dour economic times, strong cultural fundraising rolls on, ensuring continued arts progress.

Nearly every arts discipline is represented in the downtown renaissance: From large-scale architecture to kids' workshops, from absurdist plays to popular Broadway shows, from dazzling choral arrangements to digital displays, downtown in 2010 will be ablaze with artistic realization.

"I don't pine away for New York now that there's so much happening in downtown Tampa. This is where it's at," says Andrea Graham, who chairs Stageworks Theatre. The nonprofit theater company is now building its new downtown home.

Stageworks' theater is the smallest of three downtown arts and arts-related construction projects, which represent about 120,000 square feet under roof and about \$75 million in investment. The flood of arts activity has prompted a new Tampa Downtown Partnership promo effort, the "25 in 2010" campaign.

Named for 25-plus downtown arts venues and events, the campaign will boost wider recognition of, and appreciation for, the arts and the spin-off benefits. A

speakers bureau and a variety of publicity outreaches are among “25 in 2010” plans.

Why the PR kick start? “We think the arts are incredibly important,” says Kimberly Finn, liaison for the Tampa Downtown Partnership Arts & Culture Committee. “Arts add significantly to our quality of life, and there’s a huge economic impact that includes job creation.”

“Art events activate the streets and provide social capital,” says Finn. “The arts create connectivity among people, and arts encourage people to want to live downtown. And art encourages conventions and meetings. Arts venues also provide an alternative possibility of exciting new venues for various events of all kinds.”

The arts “are an important support for our urban restaurants, retail outlets, and for the vibrancy of the business district,” says Melinda Chavez, who chairs the TDP Arts & Culture Committee. “Tampa is truly becoming a significant urban district that offers all the amenities of a sophisticated community.”

Lighting the fuse for Tampa’s 2010 arts explosion will be the February 6 opening of the \$32 million Tampa Museum of Art, located in Curtis Hixon Downtown Waterfront Park; the park itself has undergone a \$15 million makeover. The TMA’s 66,000-square-foot Cornelia Corbett Center museum building overlooks the Hillsborough River and was designed by renowned architect Stanley Saitowitz.

The building is spectacular and “a bold pronouncement,” says TMA Executive Director Todd D. Smith. Two layers of perforated aluminum paneling “skin” the exterior; embedded between the panels is programmable LED lighting. Digital artist Leo Villareal designed the computer-controlled façade display. The result: Tens of thousands of software-controlled light nodes on the museum’s 45-foot-tall, 300-foot-long exterior panels. The choreographed lighting display will be “hypnotically” beautiful, terms often used to describe Villareal’s work.

Inside, TMA’s eight 1,700-square-foot galleries feature innovative translucent fabric ceilings and polished stone floors; the galleries surround a 60-foot-tall atrium topped with 16 skylights. Educational space equipped with the latest technology will offer visitors learning experiences.

The museum's inaugural exhibition is *A Celebration of Henri Matisse: Master of Line and Light*; focused on his printmaking, the 170 Matisse works also include paintings and sculptures. The exhibit is the first big Matisse show ever in the region, with pieces drawn from several collections.

From May to September, TMA hosts works by a Danish artist, *Jesper Just: Romantic Delusions*, four video installations exploring human emotion. From October through December, an American impressionist exhibit is planned. And Seth Pevnick, TMA's new curator of Greek and Roman art, has designed the permanent antiquities collection in TMA's Barbara and Costas Lemonopoulos Greek and Roman Gallery.

Meanwhile, also in Curtis Hixon Park and next door to TMA, the under-construction, 53,000-square-foot Glazer Children's Museum of Tampa will have 175 hands-on exhibits in 12 themed areas, plus five classrooms for workshops and other programs, all in a "safe, stimulating and playful learning environment." Officials say the Children's Museum should open by fall, perhaps earlier.

Tampa's burgeoning arts district delights Maryann Ferenc, current chair of Hillsborough County's official tourism corporation, Tampa Bay & Company. "With the great energy that's now here in Tampa, I believe that the new Tampa Museum, Curtis Hixon Park, and the Children's Museum will give all that energy a perfect place to coalesce," says Ferenc.

The arts acceleration will "quickly ratchet up" the public pace in Tampa's urban center, she adds. Downtown should soon be home to European style gathering and participation in the urban core, says Ferenc, owner of *Mise En Place* restaurant; Ferenc's company will vend food at the Tampa Museum of Art.

Also at refurbished Curtis Hixon Park, the annual Raymond James Gasparilla Festival of the Arts is slated March 6-7, along the city's new Tampa Riverwalk on the Hillsborough River. Gasparilla is among the biggest and best outdoor U.S. art shows: Some 300 artists culled from 1,000 entries will vie for \$75,000 in 2010 awards, including a \$15,000 best of show prize and 30 \$1,300 awards of merit.

The 40th annual Gasparilla fest will likely attract 250,000-plus people to enjoy superb painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, photography, prints, jewelry,

digital creations, and works in a dozen disciplines. The event grew from modest roots – it was once a minor sideshow in the annual Florida State Fair, which was then held west of downtown on land that today is home to University of Tampa athletics, housing, and parking.

When the fair was moved, downtown leaders organized Tampa’s first urban streets art fest. The inaugural “Gasparilla Sidewalk Art Festival” in 1971 was a relaxed affair, but the show has always had two factors that attract excellent entries – serious prize money and quality jurors. And 40 editions later, Gasparilla is as strong as ever.

On the north end of downtown Tampa’s riverfront arts district, the 335,000-square-foot David A. Straz Jr. Center for the Performing Arts has entertained more than 10 million guests since opening 22 years ago. (Until late 2009, when patron Straz made a major donation, it was called the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center; a rebranding campaign is underway.) With five theaters ranging from 2,600 to 130 seats, the Straz Center is the largest performing arts center south of Washington, D.C.’s Kennedy Center.

While it is perhaps best known for Broadway shows, about 20 companies regularly perform at the Straz Center. In residence are Jobsite Theater and Opera Tampa, and The Florida Orchestra, The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay, Tampa Bay Gay Men’s Chorus, and more than a dozen other constituent groups perform there.

A key element of the Straz Center is the Patel Conservatory. Patel is a 45,000-square-foot facility with 20 studios – two dance studios with sprung floors, a sound/lighting lab, a media arts/TV studio, and other features. The conservatory each year serves some 60,000 students via thousands of classes, workshops, and performances.

In east downtown’s Channelside District, Stageworks Theatre is building its permanent new home at Grand Central on Kennedy, a residential/retail development. Stageworks, founded and led by Anna Brennan, has raised more than half of the nearly \$1 million needed to transform the internal core of the property.

Developer Ken Stoltenberg donated the space, construction begins in January, and “we have better than a 50/50 chance of moving in by late 2010,” says Stageworks Chair Andrea Graham. The first play there will be *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

And the beat goes on. From the University of Tampa Scarfone/Hartley Gallery to the Florida Museum of Photographic Arts ... from historic Tampa Theatre to downtown police and firefighter museums ... from The Old Tampa (retail) Bookstore to the Ybor City State Museum ... from the massive St. Pete Times Forum and its star entertainers to monthly Ybor Art Walks ... downtown Tampa and nearby neighborhoods have a wondrous wealth of culture, arts, and history on offer.

In 2010, the cultural bounty will grow tremendously. “Downtown Tampa is in the midst of a renaissance, and the museum is a lynchpin in this redevelopment,” says Tampa Museum of Art Executive Director Todd Smith. “Our new home provides the perfect moment to refresh our efforts and ensure that the visual arts are integrated more fully into the fabric of life.”