

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

Dialogue on the future of culture begins with hope

In an abandoned area of a highly populated urban neighborhood, architect Michael Poris saw hope where most others saw blight.

Last summer, Poris and his partner, Doug McIntosh, of the Birmingham-based McIntosh-Poris architecture firm, completed work on the 28,000-square-foot Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts.

You won't find it around Motown. You'll have to travel back to Grand Rapids.

"It's helped to bring back that part of the city," said Poris of Birmingham. In a neglected and crime-infested area of Grand Rapids, McIntosh-Poris is part of a group that developed an arts center which combines performance and exhibit venues with lecture and instructional classrooms.

Of course, it takes more than an architect's sense of logistics and ability to "create an environment" to turn despair into a fertile valley of aspirations.

It takes a dream, a few dreamers and that great intangible - timing.

Broaden public debate

A multi-purpose community arts center is a prospect currently under serious consideration by several communities in Oakland County, including Farmington, Rochester and Troy. Apparently, the issue comes down to whether communities can reconcile arts funding along with other basic city services that contribute to the



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFKETER

Idealistic: Michael Poris, (left), and Douglas McIntosh have a 21st-century idea of urban renewal.

quality of life.

In many ways, the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts represents an example of how an art center can be a dynamic version of a modern-day town hall.

"They wanted the institution to be constantly changing," said Poris, who worked with McIntosh in the mid-1980s at the prestigious architectural firm, Cesar Pelli & Associates in New Haven, Conn.

"(In Grand Rapids), we worked with the program directors, administrators and artists to design a process so the (Urban Institute) would be a site that was continually evolving to meet the community's needs."

According to Poris, the possible key to success for a similar institute in the metro area is for it to be located in a place that brings together people of all communities.

Look south down I-75 or the Lodge. What Poris has in mind sounds a lot like a 21st-century notion of urban renewal.

Blueprint of a dream

At a time when many are moving to the outlying suburbs, Poris believes that ground zero for the most significant cultural rebirth in the region will be centered in downtown Detroit.

Regardless of your view on casinos and state-subsidized professional sports stadiums, the undisputed fact remains that the cultural hub of metro Detroit is being transformed by a sustained influx of capital, the physical reconstruction of downtown and a heightened demand for the arts.

Poris lays out the blueprint of a dream he shares with his partner and boyhood friend, McIntosh, both of

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FORMER SECOND CITY CAST MEMBER NANCY HAYDEN



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFKETER

UNDERTAKING THE ULTIMATE IMPROV

(Editor's note: This is the first in an ongoing series entitled, "Behind the Scenes." These articles will feature an informal Q&A with people in the arts who are "making a difference" in Oakland County.)

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER
fprovenzano@oe.homecomm.net

I sheer energy, charm and improvisational skill were the only prerequisites for the director of Oakland County's Arts, Culture & Film office, then Nancy Hayden's tenure would be already an unqualified success. Hayden, best known - until now - as an original cast member of Detroit's "Second City," doesn't have the typical administrator's simpering demeanor - to say the least.

Other public department heads may slowly pour out their personalities in a restrained bureaucratic style. Hayden, 30, pores, bubbles and wonders aloud about unnecessary layers of government. Then, of course, she has a good laugh.

But for the most part, Hayden sounds like an unabashed zealot; her passion for the arts comes out in a sweeping current. Since late November, Hayden has overseen a one-person office with a \$150,000 budget, including the disbursement of \$31,000 in mini grants. She has been in what most free thinkers would call a woman's land. The place where bureaucracy meets free-form artistry.

Yes, she had to break the news to her friends that she's part of the establishment. Hayden admits that sometimes she's amazed at the administrative sleight-of-hand and confesses that sometimes she has an impulse to perform her improv routine outside her office in the halls of the Oakland County Executive Building.

Yet, the political novice persists in the land of politics. Hayden seems to be

compelled by doing her duty and the idealistic notion that she can make a difference.

ECCENTRIC: You're an actor, director and writer. What are you doing in a government job?

HAYDEN: I never imagined working for government. I told my friends. They said, "You're doing something still!" (Smiles wryly) Perhaps I'm more moderate than most of the people in this administration.

ECCENTRIC: Are you close with your boss, County Executive L. Brooks Patterson?

HAYDEN: Oh, yes. He's my mother's younger brother. Brooks is really a fair boss. I've known a lot of his staff for years. I don't know what to call them. Ah, I call them by their first name.

ECCENTRIC: Some say you got your job because you're Brooks Patterson's niece.

HAYDEN: I just toss my resume down. I'm qualified. This job has gone from Virginia Rodgers who had a completely administrative background to Steve Wolfelt (who worked in theater restoration and as a magician before he took this job).

I've worked as a professional actor, been a cast member at "Second City," taught at Michigan State and have my own improv theater (in Royal Oak). I've gone through what every arts group (and artist) in this county has gone through when it comes to funding, and surviving.

ECCENTRIC: Some would say that you're improvisation skills will be put to the test in this job.

HAYDEN: Now I really know! Improv is improvisation. I realize that maybe I learned a lot of it from Brooks. I think every good politician can think on

their feet, and represent themselves well.

ECCENTRIC: What is the condition of "culture" in Oakland County?

HAYDEN: The visual arts are very strong, especially in Birmingham and Pontiac with all those galleries. Restaurants are doing very well, but I'd really like to see more theater - all types of theater. We're looking at the proposal for the new performing arts center on the campus of Oakland University. That's not through this office, of course, but I'll do what I can to support that idea.

ECCENTRIC: How do you see the relationship between the culture of Oakland County and the development of downtown Detroit?

HAYDEN: I never want to create a feeling of "we don't need to go there." There are niches that haven't been filled. There could be smaller venues up here for the off-Broadway shows. For instance, downtown Pontiac. Young people are coming to downtown Pontiac, coming to the clubs, and galleries. Pontiac has an urban feel, it needs a few theaters. It could help the Strand Theatre (currently closed) in any way.

Let's make Woodward a two-way street. Hey, that could be our new slogan.

ECCENTRIC: Let's sound bureaucratic. What's your vision?

HAYDEN: I want to create a tighter-knit community of arts organizations. Just plain better communication is needed right now. (Laughs) I have a pretty loud voice.

Also, I want to create cultural events, and cultural mainstays. I really want to do a film festival, an all-around package, like "Arts, Beats & Eats." That's a case, by the way, of every-one winning - the arts community and business. I'm not interested in making a better version of what's happening down-

town. I want to find things that aren't happening anywhere and make them happen here.

But I'm one cog in a wheel along with the arts councils in the various communities. Communication and support go hand in hand. I could come in with a million ideas. (Announces) Puppet shows everywhere in the middle of winter. But really it's a matter of which ideas can fly.

ECCENTRIC: I feel that I can throw anything at you and you'll respond.

HAYDEN: Go ahead, I'll bounce it back.

ECCENTRIC: OK, you need to raise money from a prospective corporate philanthropist for a countywide arts event. Let's hear your sales pitch.

HAYDEN: The business community can benefit from a thriving arts community. Oakland is the third wealthiest county in the country. People in the county who invest in their homes, schools and communities want interesting things to do. Investing culturally in Oakland County is a shrewd business move.

ECCENTRIC: Will we see you in speaking out about arts issues. If so, where?

HAYDEN: (Laughs) My own cable access show. Really, wherever I have the opportunity. I think my priorities are improving communication, demonstrating a passion for the arts and providing leadership.

ECCENTRIC: When you're sitting at one of those department head meetings don't you just want to rip off an improv?

HAYDEN: (Laughs) Every once in a while, yeah.

ECCENTRIC: What's funny about government?

HAYDEN: Sometimes there's so many steps when you only need a few. Sometimes people create problems for themselves.

UMS presents song recital of opera's emerging superstar

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER
fprovenzano@oe.homecomm.net

There was a feeling that Renée Fleming "was on the edge of breaking out" when she made her first appearance at a University Musical Society Concert, said Sara Billman, director of marketing at UMS.

In the six years since she last performed in Ann Arbor, Fleming has gone from the edge of fame to being strapped to a rocket headed for opera world stardom.

This Thursday she'll perform an emotionally and musically diverse program of works by Schubert, Mendelssohn, Debussy, and Barber.

Fleming's UMS concert wasn't simply a case of checking this year's day planner to find an open date. According to Billman, it took several years before a date was available on Fleming's jam-packed schedule.

Ticket sales

Billman said ticket sales were brisk for the concert at 4,000-seat Hill Auditorium. She compares ticket-buyer interest to the response to opera superstar Cecilia Bartoli's sold-out September 1997 performance.

Since she last performed a program of Berg's compositions at Hill Auditorium, Fleming has had the type of hectic, yet impressive schedule of performances that rival any of opera's top-level stars.

Last September, at the San Francisco Opera, she performed as Blanche DuBois in the world premiere of Tennessee Williams' classic "A Streetcar Named Desire," adapted as an opera by Andre Previn. Then, in October, Fleming traveled to the New York Metropolitan Opera where she starred in the new acclaimed production of "The Marriage of Figaro," alongside a stellar cast, that included Bartoli and Eryn Terfel.

After her appearance in Ann Arbor, Fleming will perform recitals at Carnegie Hall and Chicago's Orchestra Hall. And for those who can't hear and see Fleming for themselves, there's a new recording, "Star Crossing Lovers," an upcoming CD of duets and arias with Placido Domingo.

"Renée is quickly approaching

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Rising star: Soprano Renée Fleming will perform recitals at Carnegie Hall and Chicago's Orchestra Hall after her Ann Arbor appearance on Jan. 14.

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST



Gerhardt Knodel

Knodel weaves reputation as an influential artist

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER
fprovenzano@oe.homecomm.net

There's a long pause after Gerhardt Knodel is informed he's been called a genius - not by one, two or three people, but by a growing list of admirers.

In his typical style, Knodel takes a metaphorical step back to figure out what that means. "Genius," he concedes, is a word too often substituted by those trying to describe their enthusiasm for an artist's work.

If nearly 30 years as a fiber artist has taught him anything, it's not to be bound by preconceptions

or labels, even the most complimentary. Hyperbole, Knodel knows all too well, flies away like tissue blown in the wind.

While being bound by his administrative duties as director of Cranbrook Academy of Art for the last several years, Knodel has found time to create impressive large-scale public commissions and explore a new approach to fiber art. "Skywalking," Knodel's current exhibit of unconventional small-scale works at the Sybaris Gallery in Royal Oak, continues his exploration of light, motion and space that exists within textiles.

One look at the exhibit and it's clear that Knodel isn't bound by traditional materials, nor his impressive career as one of the leading fiber artists in the world.

Art as metaphor

Ironically, there isn't any semblance of textiles in "Skywalking." No cloth or weaving. Instead, there are an intricate series of drill holes in a black polycarbonate material that resembles stencils on thick panels of film.

Ultimately, the exhibit is a metaphor: a drill bit is like a nec-

WHAT: "Skywalking," an exploration of light, motion and space by Gerhardt Knodel
WHEN: Through Saturday, Jan. 16
WHERE: Sybaris Gallery, 202 E. Third St., Royal Oak
HOURS: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, (248) 544-3388

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