

Arts League moves to Paradise

Hopes high for Harmonie Park cultural center

BY MICHAEL HODGES
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Efforts to create an arts hub downtown will get a big boost Monday when the Arts League of Michigan moves into its new home in Detroit's Harmonie Park, at the heart of the new Paradise Valley Cultural and Entertainment District. The League will host an open house for the public July 20 (see box).

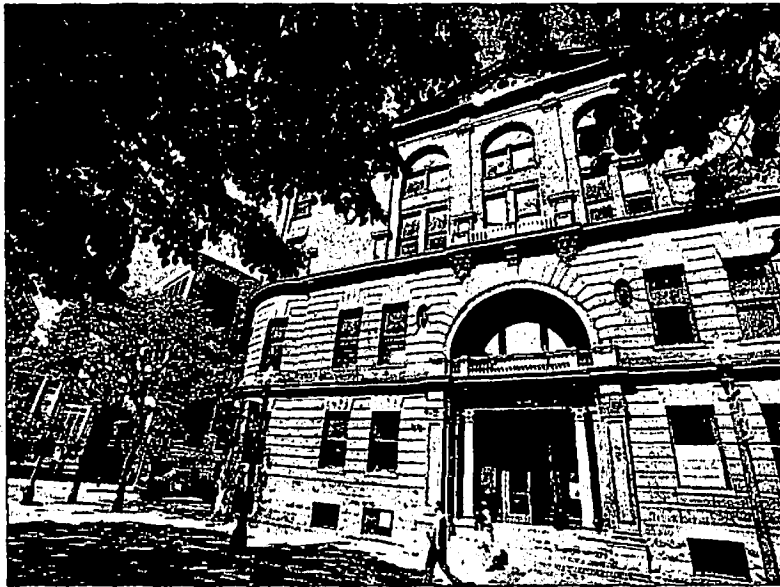
"We're living what we call the challenge of answered prayer," says League president Oliver Ragsdale Jr. with a laugh. "We prayed hard for this. And after our staff meeting today, we all walked out giddy and with our heads spinning."

Ragsdale can be forgiven if he sounds tickled pink.

For 18 years, the League has been housed in cramped offices on Second Avenue, its many public activities — from art classes for kids to jazz performances — drizzled across town wherever they could find the space.

So scoring 37,000 square feet of studio and performance space in the Harmonie Club Building that crowns the north end of the park still feels more like dream than reality. The League has rechristened the old Club — a German social center built in 1895 — the Virgil H. Carr Cultural Arts Center after its late board president.

The nonprofit League's good fortune is even better news for Paradise Valley's Harmonie Park, which has had sputtering success in turning itself into the sort of vibrant urban square — thronged with people out for a good time — that developers fantasize about.



Photos by Daniel Moars / The Detroit News

The old 1895 Harmonie Club in Harmonie Park is the new home of the Arts League of Michigan. Renamed the Virgil H. Carr Cultural Arts Center, it will be a permanent location for classes and performances.

Open house

What: Community Open House at Arts League of Michigan

When: 6:30-9 p.m. July 20

Where: Virgil H. Carr Cultural Arts Center, 311 E. Grand River Ave., Detroit

Questions? (313) 870-1680 or www.artsleague.com

Discount parking: Available at Detroit Opera House parking structure

Aiming to become a multicultural arts center that brims with activity, the League's new center will attract new foot traffic to an urban gem badly in need of it, rescue an iconic building long empty or underutilized, and restore the visual arts to their rightful place in the new district's cultural mix.

"I'm very excited," says archi-

tect Rainy Hamilton Jr., one of the principals at Hamilton Anderson Associates, located in Harmonie Park.

"We've been here a long time," he says, "and this is exactly the fit we've looked for. It's a perfect marriage."

The Arts League, supported by corporate and foundation grants, was founded in 1991.

"As an African-American organization," Ragsdale says, summarizing their mission, "we want to lift up our culture and include as many as possible in understanding and participating in that culture."

The League is probably best known for arts classes and summer art and jazz camps aimed at junior- and senior-high school students, which every year reach about 1,000 kids. With the expanded space, those classes will now be extended to adults and

children as young as 7.

The League also has pulled together hip performance and educational shows, such as their 1999 Duke Ellington Centennial Tour or the 2003 "Rock My Soul: The Black Legacy of Rock and Roll," which the League produced with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland.

The League promises to engage passersby and the neighborhood with a store, two art galleries, frequent performances and artists-in-residence whom visitors can watch at work.

This sort of openness will be critical, says Mark Nickita, the former head of the Detroit chapter of the American Institute of Architects, if the League hopes to contribute to the liveliness of Harmonie Park — especially if



Kyle Jordan, 14, paints as work continues on the new location for the Arts League, which offers art classes for children, among other things.

there's something attractive at the street level that pulls pedestrians inside.

"If they have some level of opening up to the street, they could really make an impact," Nickita says. "But if they're closed up, out of sight, they won't."

Around the corner at Mezzanine, a high-end furnishings store, owner Joe Posch takes the positive view, imagining restaurant-goers strolling into the

League before their reservations.

"People love jumping in some place before they go to dinner," he says. "Honestly, I can't think of a better use for the space."

Downstairs at Espresso Jazzy Cafe, owner Michael Thacker entertains no doubt about the League's positive contribution to the Park.

"It's going to bring new life to the community," he says.

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