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FEATURED

RIT students join Dove Block project

By CHRIS LAVIN

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RIT students discuss the Dove's first floor entry area.

Submitted photo

GENEVA — One evening last week, workers strung temporary wiring through all three floors and the basement of the Dove Block.

For the first time in decades light poured out onto the streets from this iconic, but fragile 19th Century building being restored in the heart of Geneva's downtown. The building's unique windows bathed the street in a style gone by.

Slowly — and carefully — 14 design students and their professor from the Rochester Institute of Technology walked up and down temporary staircases erected for workers who are, it is now clear, pulling off a renovation project far more substantial than initially realized.

The Dove Block — named for the family of its builder and home, for a time, of one of America's greatest abstract artists, Arthur Dove — had been slated for renovation. Once stripped of its decaying plaster, however, fissures in the soft brick walls, the remnants of fires past, and damage from long hidden leaks made it apparent this is as much a rebuilding as a renovation.

"I've seen worse," said Pat Crowe, the project manager from Chrisantha Construction. "But this is a challenging project to be sure."

The RIT students and the building's prospective new owner, Corbett Inc. of Philadelphia, are giving Geneva a gift. All 14 students will be using their years of training to suggest how the reconstructed building could be designed and adapted for its new purposes. Sometime in May, the Dove Block Restoration Group and The Dove Tribute Group, the two non-profits heading up the renovation and first floor community gallery projects, will be presented 14 proposed designs, with 3-D and computer aided elements that may help shape what all hope will be a new Mecca for art and design in the Finger Lakes.

“This is a talented group of students,” said Kelly Jahn, a Rochester architect and RIT professor who is guiding these students in their capstone senior year projects. “I expect you’ll get some very creative ideas.”

While these students measure and design, Crowe’s construction crews continue the work necessary for eventual occupancy. Funded with \$1.4 million of state grants, the workers have to reinforce the structure from the foundation up. New supporting walls have been poured in the basement. Steel re-enforcing beams will support three floors of space. It is hoped the renovated building will become home to Corbett’s upstate New York interior design showroom and a first-floor regional gallery space that will both honor Dove’s work and the creative artists of the Finger Lakes.

“A community gallery has been a goal for many years,” said Kathryn Vaughn, a recently retired Hobart and William Smith College museum curator and member of the Dove Tribute board. “Having this space and tying it into Arthur Dove’s legacy could make a great statement for the arts in the Finger Lakes.”

But this Dove project — including its sale — is still a project very much in process. The \$1.4 million in state grants are funding the current work. An elevator shaft is taking shape in the building’s northeast corner yet a gingerly walk through the approximately 12,000 square feet of now largely open space is a lesson in history, architecture and construction. Seeing the building’s bones it is clear this project got funded just in time. The new Dove Block will be stunning, but neglect over many years is manifestly evident. —

“The back wall had been reconstructed,” Crowe said. “But everywhere else, we have lots of work to do, tying it together, strengthening it joist by joist, floor by floor.” And in some cases brick by brick.

Other aspects of the project also remain works in progress. Corbett Inc. has made a purchase offer on the building and has pledged to lease the first floor to the Dove Tribute group for five years. However, uncertainty about the impact of the city’s high tax rate on the project’s viability remains a stumbling block.

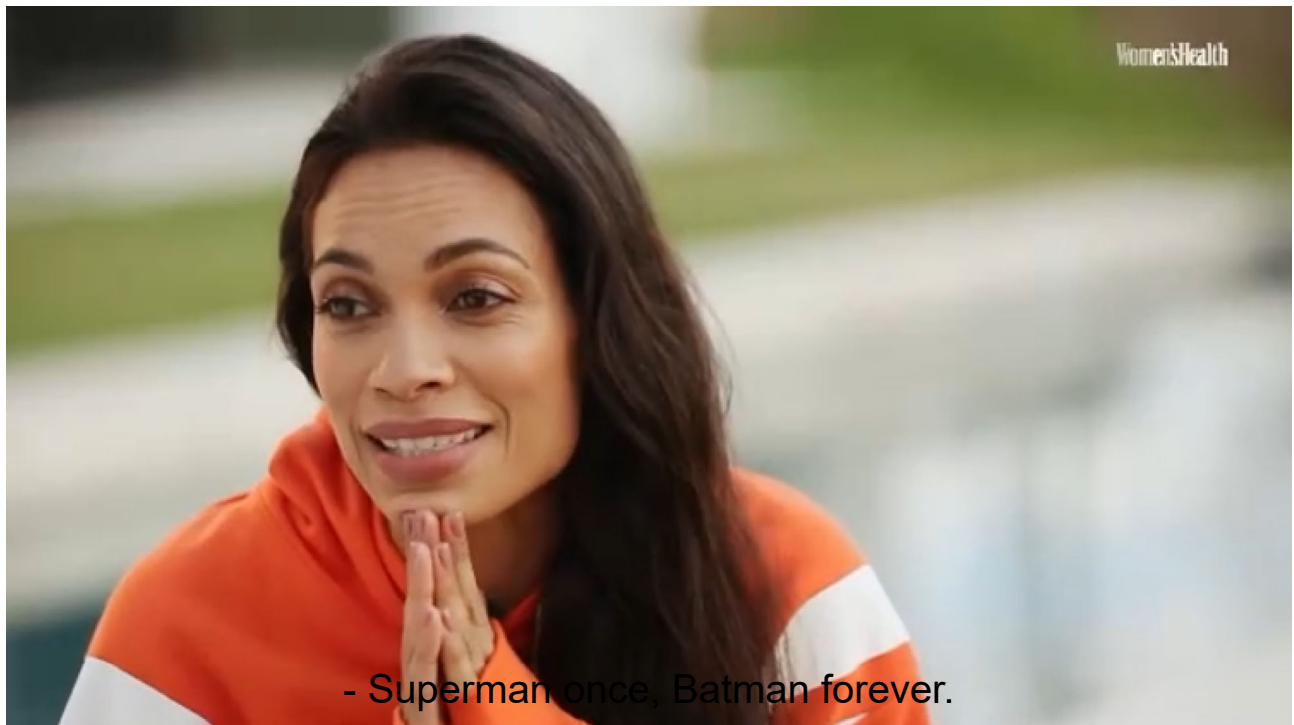
Local developer Dave Bunnell and retired HWS Professor James Spates and the two Dove Boards remain in discussions with the city on how a building that will mix public and private purposes will eventually be taxed.

If the sale goes through, the current schedule is to have the building ready for handing over to Corbett Inc. in late May or early June. Work on final finishes and the development of the space and programming of the first floor gallery would be the next steps.

“Saving an iconic building is neither easy nor fast,” Spates said. “What’s important to us is that the beauty and function of what has been an historic space for this community is being preserved.” If things go well, this city could have a gallery opening in 2021, Spates and Bunnell say.

Arthur Dove's fame has been growing in recent decades as his abstract works — many of them of Finger Lakes scenes painted in the Dove Block's open third floor — have found their way into the most prestigious museums and galleries in the U.S. including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago and The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

Chris Lavin, executive director of the Boys & Girls Club of Geneva, is a former Times reporter who later worked as a reporter and editor for newspapers in Rochester, St. Petersburg and San Diego. He contributes from time to time to the Finger Lakes Times and serves on the Dove Restoration and Tribute boards.



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